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富士見ファンタジア文庫

Slayers Special Volume 12

The Maid Might Have Seen It

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The Maid Might Have Seen It (Part 1)

“...Undercover investigation?”

I frowned and muttered at the man’s words.

We were in a small eatery in a certain town. At a table in the corner sat me and a man dressed as a sorcerer. He wore a black mantle and a black hood pulled low over his eyes. He looked incredibly suspicious, but believe it or not, he was actually a legitimate messenger from the Sorcerers' Association.

I’d heard it was a request for a slightly troublesome job—but I never imagined it would be an undercover investigation, something that sounded troublesome in the most literal sense...

“Indeed. Recently, a bandit group has been appearing in this town. They’ve struck numerous times, primarily targeting the homes of the wealthy. Based on various circumstances, we’ve pinpointed a single house in this town that seems to be their base... However, we lack decisive evidence. Therefore—”

“—Wait a second.”

I held up a hand to stop the man’s story.

“Isn't that... a job for the town officials?”

In response to my question, the man took a sip of scented tea and replied,

“That’s the thing. The client *is* a town official.”

“...Huh...?”

I reflexively knit my brows.

“What does that mean? Then why don’t those officials or guards just do the undercover work themselves? —Ah. Let me guess. Is it one of those patterns where the suspect is a powerful person in town and they’re putting pressure on the officials?”

“No. That’s not it.”

The man shook his head quietly.

“If it’s an undercover investigation, it means infiltrating as a housekeeper or a butler... and that is the problem.”

“...Why?”

“Because! In this town, public servants are strictly forbidden from holding side jobs!”

“...Oh, come on...”

“Even if it is for an investigation, if they work as a butler or a maid and receive wages, it counts as a side job! Those in a position to uphold order cannot go breaking the rules themselves! And so, the request came to us—sorcerers who can hold their own in a fight even without weapons.”

“Gaaah! Who cares about such tiny details! So what? The officials in this town care more about following boring regulations than catching thieves?!”

“...Well... complaining to me won't change anything...”

“...I guess... that’s true...”

Muttering, I took a sip of tea.

“Unfortunately, there aren't many in our Association who excel at offensive magic. So, when we heard rumors that you, Miss Lina, were stopping by this town, I came to make this request.”

“...I see...”

It sounded like a pain.

It was a pain, but—

If I took the job, the reward would be double: the commission fee *plus* a maid’s salary! Additionally, if that place really was a bandit hideout, I could take them down and snatch their treasure for myself!

Delicious! This was too delicious!

“—Understood. I’ll take it.”

With that, I gave a firm nod.

“—So, you’re the girl who asked to be hired today.”

“Yes. My name is Mina Sanders.”

I gave a sparkling smile to the auntie who came to greet me—someone who looked high-strung just by a glance.

This was a mansion located almost exactly in the center of town. This was the Brandt estate, suspected to be the bandits' hideout. They ran an extensive business that seemed quite prosperous, but according to the client, it was likely that a significant portion of those funds came from theft.

My job was to live there as a maid and catch them red-handed.

Naturally, my identity was a secret. To avoid being outed as a sorcerer, I wore the clothes of an ordinary town girl and used the alias "Mina Sanders."

If anyone thought that name was a bit too close to the original, they're still green. If you use an alias too far from your real name, you might fail to react instantly when called, which rouses suspicion. To prevent that, I used a fake name that was just a slight tweak of my real name, "Lina Inverse."

The fake letter of recommendation I handed to the auntie just now also clearly bore that name. Of course, the Association or the officials had prepared all that for me.

The auntie turned a cold gaze toward me.

"I am Kasha Shreiker. I serve as the head maid here."

"Kasha-san... is it?"

At my murmur, she looked slightly offended.

"—The maids call me Miss Shreiker," she stated flatly.

...I see... Just as she looked, she was a stiff one.

"—I have indeed seen the letter of recommendation from Duke Dermaille. However, to be honest, I don't believe someone is capable of doing the job properly just because they have a recommendation."

"...Does that mean...?"

Did I fail the infiltration already?!

I started to panic, but Kasha... no, Miss Shreiker, shook her head gloomily.

"The Master said it was fine to keep you."

"—Thank you very much!"

I gave a deep bow, but she continued in a flat tone.

"—But listen well, Mina. if you slack off or behave in a way unbecoming of this

household, we may have to ask you to leave. Please keep that in mind at all times.”

“Yes! I’ll do my best!”

I gave another bow, playing the part of a good girl.

“—Very well. Then let's go. I’ll introduce you to everyone while I show you around. Follow me.”

Without waiting for my answer, she started walking.

Just as I expected, the mansion was incredibly spacious. Multiple guest rooms, bathrooms, and toilets were a given; even for the kitchen, there was one large one and two smaller ones elsewhere. There were rooms for maids and butlers, and waiting rooms too. I exchanged greetings with every servant we passed—more than ten people just on the way to the master’s room. You can imagine the scale of the whole place.

Eventually, Miss Shreiker stopped in front of a door.

The doors to the rooms we’d peeked into or passed so far were quite grand, but this one was particularly luxurious... or rather, gaudy.

In that case, this must be—

“This is the room of the master of the house, Mr. Marshall Brandt. Greet him without being rude.”

Miss Shreiker whispered and knocked on the door. *Knock, knock*.

“...Heeey...”

The response that came from inside was, contrary to my expectations, the very slow, drawn-out voice of a middle-aged man.

“It is Shreiker. I have come to introduce the new maid.”

“It’s opeeeen.”

“Excuse me.”

She put her hand on the doorknob.

Inside the room was a collection of furniture that looked expensive but had absolutely no sense of unity. Standing near a table in the center of the room was the man.

He looked to be around forty. Black hair, average height, average build. He had no dignity or presence whatsoever—he was the kind of middle-aged guy you could find

anywhere.

“Hey. Nice to meet you. I’m Marshall.”

The guy gave a relaxed, smiling greeting.

“...Ah... h-hello... nice to meet you... My name is L... Mina Sanders, and I’ll be working here starting today. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Hey. The pleasure's mine. Well then, Miss Shreiker, I’ll leave the introduction and tour to you.”

“As you wish. We shall take our leave. —Come, Mina. Let’s go.”

Miss Shreiker bowed and turned on her heel. I hurriedly followed suit.

...Hmm... So that was Mr. Marshall... He didn’t look like a top-tier merchant or a villain, but in this world, outward impressions don’t always match what people are doing. If this place really is a bandit hideout, he’s undoubtedly involved in some way.

After leaving the room, Miss Shreiker walked silently down the hallway for a while before stopping again in front of another door.

“And this is Lady Daisy’s room.”

Knock, knock.

“Who is it?”

The response to the knock was the voice of a young woman.

“It is Shreiker. A new maid has joined us. I have come to introduce her.”

“I see. Come in.”

“Excuse me.”

Stepping through the door, we entered a room that felt exactly like a young lady’s from a good family. Two women had their backs turned to us. A woman with silver hair sat in front of a mirror while someone who appeared to be a maid was combing her hair.

The silver-haired woman glanced over her shoulder while remaining seated.

“...Heh...”

She murmured softly and stood up.

The maid also stopped her hands and turned toward us—

.....

“—Li—”

WHAM!

Before the other party could utter another word, my right corkscrew punch buried itself into the face of the maid—no, the face of Naga, who was dressed as a maid.

Yes. It was her. A woman who was all harm and no help; the woman who should stay still, not speak, and not even breathe. My self-proclaimed rival, Naga the Serpent!

She wasn't wearing her usual "evil sorceress" costume but was in a maid outfit instead, but that doesn't change a person's nature.

Which meant—she was bound to drag me down!

I figured it would be best to eliminate her now, but we were in front of others.

For now, I grabbed Naga by the collar, dragged her to the corner of the room, and lowered my voice.

“—Hey! Naga?! Why are you in a place like this—well, we can talk details later! Anyway! For now, my name is Mina, so get it right!”

Naga also lowered her voice.

“Hmph. What are you saying all of a sudden, Lina?”

“It’s Mina. I’ll explain the circumstances later. Got it?!”

“...Is something the matter, Mina?”

Miss Shreiker asked with a frown. I hurriedly waved my hands.

“—Ah, no. It’s just, she’s someone I know. Ahaha... hahahaha.”

“Is that so, Naga?”

When asked, Naga tossed her hair back in her usual fashion.

“Hmph. Well, something like that. You could say she's my former self-proclaimed rival. Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!”

Who is?! Who is?!

While suppressing the urge to snap back, I gave a twitching smile.

“...W-well... setting the 'rival' part aside... that's how it is.”

“—Hmm. She seems like a rather interesting girl.”

It wasn't Miss Shreiker who spoke.

Standing quietly in the center of the room, watching us, was the silver-haired girl whose hair Naga had been tending to.

She had long straight hair and large eyes. She was probably around the same age as me.

She looked straight at me.

“I’m Daisy Brandt. Nice to meet you.”

“...Ah. Same here, nice to meet you.”

I gave a bow.

I pretended not to notice the sharp light slumbering deep within the gaze Daisy directed at me.

“—Hmph. I’ve read you like a book, Lina Inverse.”

Still in her maid outfit, Naga puffed out her chest pointlessly. It was that night—after the day's work was finally over and we could catch our breath.

I had taken Naga, who was demanding an explanation, to the back garden of the mansion. A thin crescent moon, looking like a tear in the night sky, shone in the middle of the heavens, scattering its faint light into the darkness. Garden trees and warehouses stood around us, casting black shadows. If we whispered inside the mansion, there was a risk of someone eavesdropping. But here, there was no such worry.

And yet, despite being the one who demanded an explanation, Naga’s first words upon arriving were those.

“...Read what...?”

“It’s obvious. The reason you came to work here as a maid. You were jealous that I, Naga the Serpent, was recognized for my talent as a maid, and you took the job out of a sense of rivalry!”

“As if! ...But thinking about it, why the heck are *you* working as a maid in a place like

this?”

“Hmph. I was eating at a town diner and realized I didn't have any money. Not knowing what else to do, I just started laughing loudly, and that girl Daisy took a liking to me and scouted me as a maid!”

“...Every single time, you manage to build these weird connections for the weirdest reasons... you...”

“Well, that is simply my natural virtue.”

“...Yeah, whatever... As for me, I have to do an undercover investigation of this mansion for a small job. So, I infiltrated as a maid. Of course, this is a secret from everyone else. Got it?”

At my words, Naga flashed a grin.

“Heh... so in other words, there’s a significant profit to be made.”

Gack!

...Well... it’s true that if this place really is a bandit hideout, I was thinking it wouldn't hurt to snag a bit of the treasure they've hoarded while I’m taking them down... no, I mean "quietly confiscate"...

“...P-profit? Nothing like that... No, it was a request through the Sorcerers' Association, so the pay is modest...”

“—The fact that you accepted such a job means there’s some benefit beyond the official reward.”

...! She read me...

“Hmph. The fact that I, Naga the Serpent, happened to be here is a sign from the heavens that the best course of action is for me to lend a hand and split the profit!”

“What kind of gangster sign from the heavens is that?! Anyway! I’m doing this job alone, so don’t get in my way, Naga!”

I spoke sharply, but Naga remained unfazed.

“...Hmph... Is that wise? What if I were to tell everyone in the mansion that you’ve infiltrated for some kind of investigation?”

“Ugh...”

...T-this woman... She’s going there...?

Maybe my first thought was right and I should have eliminated her as soon as possible...

No. It’s not too late. Fortunately, there’s no one around—

“—Naga! Hide!”

The elimination plan was temporarily suspended as I grabbed Naga’s hand and pulled her deep into the bushes.

I definitely felt someone’s presence just now. Holding our breath, we hid for a while.

A single figure approached, killing their footsteps as if wary of their surroundings. They didn't seem to have noticed us. They were headed—likely toward the warehouse.

—A member of the bandit group?!

It would be easy to catch them, but if I caught them now, it would be just as easy for them to talk their way out of it. For now, I’ll just watch—

“Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! I wonder what business you have in a place like this at this hour?!”

Ignoring my intentions completely, Naga stood up and parted the bushes with her signature loud laughter.

Aaaah! She ruined it instantly!

“...Eh...? Ah... Naga-kun... was it...?”

The response was the dazed voice of a man.

...This voice...?!

“Oh. Mr. Marshall.”

Just as Naga said, standing in the moonlight was the dazed master of the house, Mr. Marshall.

Still looking out of it, he scratched his head.

“Well, you see. I was thinking about whether I locked the warehouse today, and I got worried. To be honest, I wanted a lamp, but I don't really know where they are, and I felt bad about waking the maids at this hour. Hahaha.”

“Hmph. I see.”

Naga accepted his very weak excuse immediately.

You believe that?! Really?!

...Well... it *is* Naga...

“—So, Miss Naga, what are you doing at this hour?”

“Hmph. My hobby is standing perfectly still in the shadows of garden trees in the middle of the night.”

What kind of excuse is that?!

“I see. You have many hobbies. Actually, when I was young, I had a period where I was into that kind of thing too. It’s great, being young.”

You were into that? Seriously?

Hiding in the bushes, I continued to fire off mental retorts.

“Well, anyway. I’m going to go check the lock on the warehouse. Good luck standing still in the shadows, Miss Naga...”

—*Rustle*.

It was then that a tree a short distance away swayed with a small sound.

“...Oh...?”

Mr. Marshall turned his gaze toward it vacantly.

For an instant—but certainly—I saw it. A black figure running through the depths of the shrubbery.

—That was...?!

Zip!

I kicked off the ground and burst out of the bushes, chasing after the black figure I’d seen.

By "black," I don't mean they were just hard to see in the dark. This person was covered from head to toe in black clothing.

They were almost certainly a member of the bandit group. In that outfit, there’s no way they could talk their way out of it.

I’ll catch them and squeeze every detail about their organization out of them!

“...Oh...? You must be Miss Mina...”

I ignored Mr. Marshall's dazed muttering.

While chanting a spell under my breath, I dashed.

The figure should have headed toward the warehouse...

—There!

Next to one of the many warehouses, a single black figure was crouched on top of the wall.

"Ice..."

As I ran through the trees, just as I was about to release the spell—

Trip!

"——?!"

Something caught my foot, and I tumbled onto the ground.

"...Ouch, ouch, ouch..."

Looking back, a thin rope had been stretched between two trees. When had that been set up?

And when I looked back at the wall—naturally, the black figure was already gone.

A silver blade flashes in the morning sun.

Tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tan!

My right hand flies with the brilliant sound of a kitchen knife!

Left behind were—perfectly sliced vegetables, lined up on the cutting board.

Oooooh! Clap-clap-clap-clap!

The other maids applauded my knife skills.

—Hmph. To think the training my sister back home hammered into me would be useful in a place like this.

—But then.

Spa-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta!

A rhythmic sound of a knife, no less impressive than mine, echoed through the

kitchen!

“——?!”

I turned around in shock to see Naga holding a knife with a relaxed smile.

And on her cutting board were beautifully julienned vegetables!

...This woman... she’s good!

However, to lose to someone like Naga in cooking would be a disgrace to humanity—no, to all living things!

“...It seems... I have no choice but to get serious...”

“Hmph! Bring it on! L... no, Mina!”

Our gazes clashed, sending sparks flying!

“Curse you, Naga! To think you’d fight me to a draw!”

I muttered to myself that night, marking circles and crosses on a piece of wood I was using as a memo after the day's work was over.

All day today, I’d been competing with Naga in general housework, and the result was a complete draw!

“...Hmph... In terms of the quality of the cooking, I’m definitely winning, so as long as I don’t slack off, there’s no fear of being overtaken tomorrow or the day after. Using that as a foundation, if I put more effort into the laundry and bed-making where I’m losing by a narrow margin and aim for a comeback, the odds of winning are high! Alright! Tomorrow’s strategy is set!”

With that decided, there was only one thing left to do: rest up for tomorrow’s competition.

In my pajamas, I turned off the lamp and crawled into bed.

And then I fell asleep...

.....

“As if I could!”

I snapped at myself and leaped out of bed.

I’d gotten so caught up in my rivalry with Naga that I’d forgotten I came here to catch the bandits! What was I doing, exhausting all my energy on the "camouflage" maid

work?!

...Man. I almost lost myself and spent my whole life as a maid.

Come to think of it, I hadn't done any investigation into the black figure I saw in the garden last night.

...It’s true that I’m tired from doing housework for the first time in a while...

I scrambled out of bed and changed my clothes.

Now. Finally, the investigation begins.

However, the garden was far too dark for an investigation.

The only light was the thin moon, just like the night before. The stars and the light from the lamps leaking from the mansion were almost useless. It was impossible to check for footprints or do any detailed searching.

...Hmph... I have no choice...

I stood near where I’d seen the figure and chanted a spell.

“Lighting!”

In response to the "Words of Power," a small, faint ball of light was born in my palm.

Normally, this spell creates a much brighter light, but that would risk someone in the mansion noticing. So, I’d tweaked the spell slightly to create a long-lasting but low-intensity light.

With this much light, and with the help of the garden trees as cover, there was little risk of being spotted from the mansion.

The person in black had been between the trees. Normally, it’s not a place people walk. I thought there might be footprints—but...

There were no footprints, only traces of the area having been swept with a broom.

...Now that I think about it... this house employed several gardeners...

Of course, it’s possible that those gardeners are also part of the bandit group and intentionally swept away the footprints, but the most suspicious person is still Mr. Marshall. No, in the worst-case scenario, everyone in the mansion except for me and Naga could be in on it.

—At this rate, I’ll just have to stake out the place every night and wait for them to

move... No, since they know I saw them, it’s unlikely they’ll move again so soon.

In that case, the only way is to sneak into the various rooms and warehouses to gather evidence...

“Oh, Miss Mina.”

Jolt!

The voice from behind made me jump out of my skin.

Turning around, I saw Miss Daisy holding a lamp, a gown thrown over her pajamas.

...I... I didn't feel her presence at all just now! Who the heck is she?!

Whether she noticed my internal panic or not, she spoke calmly.

“What is it? In a place like this, at this hour?”

“...Ah... no, well, you see...

I think I dropped a charm I had somewhere... I just realized it and came to look for it.

...Why are you here, Miss Daisy?”

“I couldn't sleep, so I was taking a walk when I saw a light.

How impressive. To think you can use spells.”

“Oh, no. A sorcerer I know taught me... this is the only one I can use, though.”

In this situation where I don’t know who’s an ally or an enemy, it would be bad if she knew I was a real sorcerer. I spun a lie on the spot.

“I see.

—But no matter how much you can use a lighting spell, it’s useless in this darkness.

Do it tomorrow.”

“...Y... yes...”

It would be unnatural to say no. I nodded simply.

“Well then—let’s go.”

Guided by the light of the lamp in Daisy’s hand, the two of us started walking side-by-side.

“...It’s romantic, isn't it? The light of a lamp,” Daisy said as we walked.

“...Yeah... well... it has a nice atmosphere.”

“Speaking of romantic—

Say, Miss Mina, have you ever... been in love?”

“...Huh...?”

I reflexively asked back at the sudden change in topic.

“...L-love...?”

I mean... that was out of nowhere...

But come to think of it, almost without exception, the men who have appeared around me have been a bunch of weirdos.

...Well... if you asked if there were any normal women, I’d have to shake my head there too...

The most normal man I’ve met was my dad back home... but obviously, he doesn't count.

As for the others, before I could even feel any romantic emotion, they were the type of guys who made me want to tell them to live their lives a bit better.

Love in this environment...?

“It seems you don’t have much experience with that.”

“...Yeah... well...”

I replied vaguely, scratching my head.

“Love is wonderful.

The world says there’s an age for being 'in love with love,' and I might be in that stage myself.”

“...Is that so...?”

“Yes.

I’m constantly falling in love.”

Saying that, Daisy stopped and turned toward me. I stopped too.

“—Whether the partner is a man or a woman—”

“.....?!”

A bad feeling shot down my spine for an instant.

...Wait, this development... could it be...?

“My first impression of you—it was very intense.

After all, as soon as you entered the room, you landed a corkscrew punch on Naga...

That’s the first time anyone has ever done that.”

...Well, certainly, it’s not something that happens very often...

“Yes. From that moment—

I fell in love with you.”

“...U-um, listen...”

I tried to speak, but then I realized with a shock—my tongue wouldn't move.

No, not just my tongue. My entire body was being taken over by a dull numbness.

“...Guh...?”

As I collapsed to my knees, what echoed in my ears was Daisy’s laughter?!

“Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! It was your mistake to stand downwind!

Scattering a numbing agent into the wind to hit your target! This is how I’ve always gotten my love interests!

Now. You too shall quietly become a victim of my love!”

That’s not love, that’s a crime!!

I wanted to snap back, but my tongue and body were numb and wouldn't move at all!

Daisy walked up slowly and placed her right hand—on my left cheek.

(The Maid Might Have Seen It: To be continued!)

Preview of the Next Episode

Lina faces the biggest pinch of the series (in more ways than one)! What will her fate be?!

Will the story actually return to the main plot next time?!

Or will it just slide into an "adult-rated" development?! (Hey, now!)

For that matter, is this story actually going to be resolved properly in the next episode?!

With a development that even the author can’t predict (No comment), what kind of conclusion awaits?!

Next time: **“The Maid Might Have Seen It” (Part 2)**. Watch and wait!

The Maid Might Have Seen It (Part 2)

Synopsis

A certain merchant house in a certain town is acting as a hideout for a bandit group—

Ordered to conduct an undercover investigation, Lina infiltrates the mansion in question under the name "Mina Sanders"!

There, she encounters a variety of people!

The recurring Naga the Serpent; Shreiker, the head maid; Marshall, the master of the house; and his only daughter, Daisy.

As Lina proceeds with her investigation, a black figure appears before her.

And then—

Daisy, at that age where one is "in love with love," launches an indiscriminate romantic attack on Lina!

“—What exactly do you think you are doing?”

A voice came from the darkness at that very moment.

“—Wha?!”

Jolt! Daisy trembled and reflexively took a step back.

Behind her—emerging from the depths of the darkness—was Miss Shreiker, dressed in her usual attire.

“...S... Shreiker-san...”

Apparently, Daisy found her difficult to deal with; she flinched slightly and asked, “W... why are you here?!”

In response, Shreiker pulled a notebook from her pocket.

“I saw the Young Mistress leaving the mansion. According to my statistics, whenever the Young Mistress sneaks out at night, trouble occurs approximately six out of seven times. Please refrain from going out at night.”

She spoke in a businesslike tone, to which Daisy replied with a sulky expression:

“...I... I just thought I’d try to find a wonderful romance...”

“As has been the case before—please refrain from using sleeping pills to 'get' someone just because you took a liking to them, regardless of their will. Covering it up afterward is a massive ordeal.”

...She did that often?! This girl...

“Besides, that girl is under my management as the head maid. As long as the responsibility lies with me, trouble is a problem.”

“...Ngh... Guuh...!”

Daisy gritted her teeth.

“...Fine! Shreiker-san, for your sake today, I’ll withdraw quietly! But don’t forget! I haven't given up on this love yet! Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!”

Spouting nonsensical lines, she spun around and ran back toward the mansion.

“...Good grief...”

Shreiker sighed as she watched Daisy's retreating back. She turned toward me.

“...I assume you were called out by the Young Mistress... but you mustn't. From now on, even if you are called out in the middle of the night, do not follow her.”

...If you feel that way, don't let a person like that run wild...

While I thought that, my body was still riddled with numbness, so I couldn't even manage a retort.

“Regardless. We are going back to the mansion tonight.”

With that, she hoisted me up effortlessly with one hand and began walking toward the house.

From the following day—

The days of searching while performing maid duties began.

Since I was a maid, getting into the various rooms was easy. Under the guise of cleaning, I entered the rooms and searched the surroundings. If I could find evidence that someone was a member of the bandit group, the case would be closed instantly.

However.

Four days into the search, I had gained absolutely nothing.

...Well, come to think of it, no matter who is a member of the bandits, it’s unlikely they’d leave evidence in a place where a new maid could easily find it.

In that case, the only place left unsearched was—

Semi-unconsciously, I looked out the window. Beyond the trees stood several warehouses.

A thin moon shone in the sky.

Amidst the scattered stars, I glided silently through the night wind.

That night.

I floated from my room’s window using Levitation, aiming for the warehouses in the back. Previously, I’d been caught by Daisy while walking, but this way, there was little risk of being spotted.

There were three warehouses in total. For now, I’ll start with the one in the back, which seems the least visible from the mansion.

The warehouse was of very ordinary construction, with just one large door in front. The walls were stone, and there were no windows at all.

I cancelled the spell and landed in front of the furthest warehouse.

Naturally, the door was tightly locked.

...If it were a simple lock, I could manage to open it, but the one on this door seemed to have quite a complex mechanism. This was a bit beyond my skills.

Since this was strictly an investigation, I couldn't exactly blast through the door or walls with an offensive spell...

That said, if I just went back to my room because it was locked, I’d be a total moron.

...Well then... what’s the plan...

I tilted my head and thought for a moment—

And then, I began to chant a spell under my breath.

Not a spell to open the lock—but an offensive spell.

I felt it. The presence of someone lurking nearby.

—To those thinking, *“Wait, are you just going to fire off an attack spell at someone nearby without a word?!”*

The answer is, of course, yes.

It depends on the time and place, but anyone sneaking around here in the middle of the night is up to no good. Except for me, of course.

Just as the spell was nearly complete—

“—Hmph. It is you after all, Mina.”

But before I could release the spell, Naga, dressed in her maid outfit, emerged from the shadows of the building!

“Naga?! Why are you here?!”

I temporarily halted the spell and frowned. She puffed out her chest pointlessly.

“Ho-ho-ho...”

BONK.

Just as she was about to let out a loud laugh, a bronze statue about the size of a person’s torso emerged from the darkness with a spectacular thud and smacked Naga on the back of the head, knocking her down!

“I told you not to make a scene! Everyone in the mansion will hear you!”

“That voice?!”

As if responding to my words, a figure emerged slowly from the darkness, carrying a bronze statue in one hand—

“The pervert girl!”

“Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho. Exactly. I ordered Naga-san to track your movements! I told you, didn't I? I’ll never give up on this love!”

Daisy spoke boastfully.

This girl! I called her a pervert, and she just laughed and admitted it! She’s self-aware and totally unashamed. To be honest, this type of person is the hardest to handle.

“Hmph. That’s how it is.”

As usual, Naga recovered without warning and stood beside Daisy, puffing out her chest for no reason.

“C-curse you, Naga! To forget all the kindness I’ve shown you and side with Daisy?!”

“When have I ever received kindness from you?! I only remember receiving attacks! Anyway, if this succeeds, Daisy will give me a huge reward!”

“That’s right! Surrender quietly and become the prey of my love!”

The two of us closed the distance, side-by-side.

Fortunately, I was upwind. The trick Daisy used before wouldn't work, but she might have more than just that.

What should I do?! Run, or knock them out?!

I asked myself—and then, I came up with an answer.

I chanted a spell—

“Lighting!”

I released the spell!

Flash!

In an instant, a blinding light exploded right in front of the three of us!

“Gah?!”

I heard Naga and Daisy scream. I had closed my eyes to block the light, and at the sound of their cries, I turned on my heel and bolted!

But at that moment.

Whoosh!

With a sound like rustling leaves, something draped over me from behind!

“—Wha?!”

My hands and feet got tangled; I lost my balance and fell flat on my face.

—Is this—a casting net?!

“—Kh! A blinding spell?!”

“Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! Don't worry, Daisy! I felt a catch in my net!”

I looked back to see Daisy and Naga blinking away the light, holding casting nets. It seemed Naga’s throw was the one that caught me.

There’s no convenient spell to cut a net all at once. If I struggled, I’d only get more tangled. I had to stay calm and untangle myself, but I didn't think those two would allow that.

In that case—I’ll just have to take them down!

Resolved, I began chanting a spell. If I could just finish before their vision returned—

“...Hmph. Quite a pathetic sight, Mina.”

As expected, Naga was the first to recover. Pulling in the net, she slowly approached.

“Give up and quietly—”

Before Naga could finish, my spell was complete!

“Elmekia Lance!”

This spell deals direct damage to the target’s spirit, exhausting them. An ordinary person hit by this would have no physical injuries but would be bedridden for a while. No matter how thick-skinned Naga is, this should stop her!

However!

Just as the lance of light fired from point-blank range was about to hit Naga—

“Whoa?!”

Perhaps catching her foot in her own net, Naga tripped and fell flat!

Aaaaaaah?!

The lance of light sailed over the fallen Naga and pierced deep into the shrubbery.

“Kyaaa?!”

—A woman’s scream came from the darkness behind the trees.

“...?”

For a moment, all three of us forgot our positions and looked at each other in silence. I managed to get out of the net and walked toward the voice. Daisy and Naga followed.

Beyond the bushes—

There lay a person dressed in black, knocked out cold, likely from taking my spell head-on.

Just like before, they were covered in black from head to toe. I couldn't tell if it was the same person I saw earlier, but from the scream and the build, it was definitely a woman.

And one thing was certain: this was a member of the bandits.

“...What is this person?”

Ignoring Daisy’s question, I chanted a spell.

“Lighting.”

A faint light floated in the air. I turned the figure over and, still in silence, pulled off the black mask.

“—This person—!”

Daisy let out a small cry at the face beneath the mask.

“...What was her name again...?”

...At least remember the names of your own servants...

While I made that mental retort, I realized I didn't remember her name either...

Regardless, I recognized the face. No mistake. It was one of the maids working at the mansion.

“—What is the meaning of this?! What on earth?!”

Daisy asked in a quiet tone, staring at me.

—Naturally—

I couldn't exactly answer honestly: “I was hired to do an undercover investigation of a bandit group.”

But even if I said, “I can’t tell you,” Daisy wouldn't just accept it. If I handled this poorly, she might stalk me day and night, ruining the investigation.

In that case—

Sigh...

I let out a long breath.

“—Fine. I suppose I can explain the situation... However.”

“However?”

Daisy frowned. I held up my right index finger.

“You must not tell anyone else about this.”

“Yes. Fine.”

“And one more thing. Give up on making me a victim of your love once and for all.”

“.....?!”

She was stunned for a moment, glancing back and forth between the unconscious maid and me. Eventually, she let out a long breath.

“...Fine... I’ll give up on you.”

Whether curiosity won out or she was just tired, she muttered her agreement.

Alright!

I suppressed the urge to do a victory pose and said solemnly,

“—Very well. I’ll tell you everything. First, my real name is—”

“...I can’t believe it...”

After I finished explaining the whole situation, those were the words that came out of Daisy’s mouth.

“To think our house is being used as a cover for bandits...”

“But—it’s the truth.”

I shifted my gaze to the unconscious maid.

“...In that case... it’s strange that Father hasn't noticed at all...” Daisy muttered in a low voice. I couldn't see her expression clearly in the shadows.

“Rather... it’s more natural to think this way... that Father is the leader of the bandits...”

“.....”

Naga and I remained silent, finding no words to say. In the silence, Daisy’s small murmur echoed.

“—Father is so cool.”

“Hey, hey, hey!”

“But think about it!”

She clasped her hands in front of her chest and looked up at the stars like a dreaming maiden.

“Posing as an ordinary merchant house, but when night falls, he casts off the mask and leaps into the darkness... Meanwhile, I continue to lead an ordinary life, unaware that there is darkness behind my father's smile. Aah! It’s so thrilling! I love Father!”

“...Yeah, well... whatever... anyway,” I said, scratching the back of my head.

“In any case, that’s the deal. Don’t tell anyone.”

“Wait!”

Daisy stopped me as I tried to wrap things up.

“Please! Let me help with the investigation!”

“No.”

I’d expected that. I shook my head and rejected her immediately.

“Hmph. That’s right. This case is for me and Lina to solve and split the reward!”

“No, it isn't!” I snapped at Naga.

“I don't need a share. I just want the thrill. Besides—there must be advantages to having me help. For example, her—”

She pointed at the maid.

“You probably intend to question her... but you can't exactly wake her up and question her here, can you? There’s a high chance there are accomplices in the mansion. So—I can provide a place where you can interrogate her at your leisure. How about it?”

“...Hmm...”

I crossed my arms and thought for a moment.

“—Okay. Please. But, I’ll say it again: keep it a secret.”

“Understood. Then, right away. There’s a warehouse we don’t use much on the edge of town. Follow me.”

“Lighting.”

A white light was born at my command, dispelling the darkness.

Inside the vast warehouse, various things were left in a mess. It was the warehouse on the outskirts of town that Daisy had led us to. It truly hadn't been used recently; dust was piled thin on a mountain of products that looked unlikely to sell.

“Heh-heh-heh-heh. Then let the interrogation begin! How about I start by making her the victim of my romantic fangs?!” Daisy said joyfully.

“...Is that all you have...?”

“What else is there?!”

“.....”

“Hiding her membership in a bandit group and spending her days as a maid! To think someone I thought was just a normal person nearby was such a dangerous individual! A dangerous love... ah, what a wonderful sound.”

You’re the most dangerous one here.

“...Well... I hate to ruin your expectations, but questioning her right now is impossible.”

“Eh?! Why?!”

“...The spell I used to knock her out, Elmekia Lance, damages the target’s spirit. Anyone who takes a hit from that is usually bedridden for two or three days. Waking her up is practically impossible. For now, we just have to wait for her to recover on her own.”

“No way?! And I was expecting so much!”

What were you expecting? What?

“...Then there was no need to come all the way to a place like this. We should have just handed her over to the officials, gotten the reward, and split it.”

“...I told you, there’s no splitting the reward...” I glared at Naga.

“Listen. There are still many members of the bandit group. If one of them—this woman—disappears, the others will naturally try to find out what happened to her. Now, here’s the question: Where do you think bandits look first when searching for a missing comrade?”

“I see—to see if they’ve been caught by the officials,” Daisy said.

I nodded.

“Whether a comrade has been caught... a person with a silver tongue can find that out easily. In other words—if we hand her over to the officials now, by the time she wakes up and starts talking about the bandits, the others will have long since fled.”

“I see... so we hide her here, and when the bandits move to find her, we catch them all at once.”

“Exactly.”

I nodded at the murmuring Daisy.

“Probably—tomorrow will be the day of the showdown.”

The next day.

In the morning, there was some fuss when it was discovered a maid was missing, but from then on, the day passed as usual.

Cleaning, laundry, preparing meals. As I bustled through the maid duties, time flew by—and finally, the maid work was finished late at night, as usual.

And then—

“—Hmph. You’re late, Lina.”

“You guys are early.”

When I snuck out of the mansion and reached the meeting spot in the back garden, Naga and Daisy were already there. It was the same spot where we’d caught the bandit the night before.

—Just to be clear, even though I was letting her join the investigation, I didn't necessarily trust Daisy. In the most extreme case, it was possible Daisy was actually the boss of the bandits.

Then why was I letting her tag along? If Daisy were a member of the bandits, she’d likely try to rescue the comrade trapped in the warehouse and get rid of Naga and me. In the end, they’d have to show themselves. And as long as the enemy appeared, no matter how many there were, I was confident I could handle it.

“Now we just wait. How exciting!”

“Excitement is fine, but stay quiet, Daisy. You too, Naga.”

“Of course.”

“Hmph. I know.”

The two replied casually—and then, silence fell over the darkness.

The only sounds were the wind rustling the leaves and the chirping of some unknown insects. Time drifted by with the night wind.

Eventually—

“.....?!”

How much time had passed when that figure appeared from the direction of the mansion? Walking with slow steps toward us.

The person illuminated by the moonlight was—

“Father?!”

Daisy’s voice echoed in the night sky.

Yes. The person who arrived was none other than the master of this house, Daisy’s father, Marshall Brandt himself.

She jumped out from the bushes and stopped in front of her father.

“Father?! Why?!”

“Well, you see. I got worried that I might have forgotten to lock the warehouse. And why are you in a place like this, Daisy?”

“I... I was just thinking about catching a passerby and making them my romantic partner...”

Are you a trap-door spider?!

“Hahaha. You’re such a precocious girl, Daisy.”

Don't just brush it off as "precocious," Dad!

“Well then, I’ll just check the lock on the warehouse...”

“Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!”

Before Marshall could finish, Naga burst out from the bushes with her signature laugh. I showed myself along with her.

Naga puffed out her chest and pointed a finger at Marshall.

“Enough with the pathetic excuses! We’ve known you were a member of the bandits for a long time!”

“...Bandits...?”

Marshall scratched his head in confusion.

“Um... what are you talking about...?”

“She's talking about us.”

It wasn't Marshall who answered.

Rustle.

The garden bushes shook, and several black shadows emerged. Figures dressed entirely in black—about twenty of them.

...So, almost everyone in the mansion is a member of the bandits...

“You probably thought you were setting a trap for us... but unfortunately, we anticipated that much. We’re the ones who set the trap.”

One of the figures in black spoke boastfully; likely the leader.

—Naturally, I recognized the voice.

“Shreiker-san?!”

It was Daisy who cried out in surprise.

“Yes. It is I.”

She removed her black mask, revealing the unmistakable face of the head maid, Kasha Shreiker!

“No way, you’re part of the bandits?!”

“That is correct.”

She answered Daisy’s question with a relaxed smile.

“...I see...” I interjected.

“If one of the maids is a member, I figured you, the head maid, had to be involved... but I didn't think you were the boss.”

“Could you stop using such a vulgar term as 'boss,' Miss Mina? —Well, it seems you’re the type to work for the officials, so perhaps it’s too much to ask for any sense of

refinement from someone like you. In any case—it seems it's about time we move on. We intend to take our accumulated wealth and move to another town. And before we do, we thought we'd dispose of those who know our faces all too well."

"—Why don't you stop acting so refined and talk like a normal villain? 'We're gonna finish you off before we skip town.' Even if you act polite, a villain is a villain."

At my provocation, Shreiker's brow twitched, and she said just one word:

"—Attack!"

Whoosh!

The surrounding figures in black all lunged at us at once! In that instant, I dropped flat to the ground!

At the same time—

"Bomb Di Wind!"

BOOM!

Without any warning, Naga released an indiscriminate wind attack spell that swept away both friend and foe! Standing in the aftermath, puffing out her chest and laughing loudly, was Naga, alone.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! Lina has fallen, and the one who wiped out the bandits was me! In that case, it is only right that I, Naga the Serpent, receive the entire reward! Ho-ho-ho..."

"The heck it is!"

WHAM!

As I stood up, I launched a flying kick that hit Naga square in the head!

"Gah?! Lina! You're alive?!"

"Of course! You were way too quiet this time, so I knew you'd pull something at the end! I was right! Heh-heh-heh! To think you'd try to blow me away and steal the commission—you've got some nerve. But—the bill is going to be high!"

Naga glared at me.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! Don't make me laugh! It's not too late to knock you down right now!"

"—A-all of you... how dare you do this to us... but if you resist any further... I'll take

Lady Daisy's life!"

"—Noooo! Help me! Let me go!"

"Not too late? You're the one making me laugh! Do you really think you can beat me in a fair fight?!"

"—Hey! You two! Listen to me..."

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! Since you've said that much, I'll show you my true power..."

"I said listen to me! This is why uneducated people are so..."

"*Shut up already! Fireball!*"

KABOOM!

Naga and I both fired a Fireball at the same time at Shreiker and the hostage, Daisy, who were whining nearby, to shut them up. Then we glared at each other again...

"Hm?"

Coming to our senses, Naga and I looked over to see Shreiker and Daisy, both scorched and smoldering with smoke.

"I see. So that's how it was."

First, we treated Marshall, Daisy, and Shreiker's wounds with healing spells. After listening to my explanation, Marshall nodded.

"Hmph. Now that you understand, you should show some gratitude to Naga the Serpent for helping solve the case!"

"Well, you're certainly right. I'll give you both a small reward."

"Hmph! What a fine attitude! I'll praise you for that! Ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Whether he lacked a backbone or was just bad with money, Marshall agreed to Naga's demand immediately.

...Well, as for me, if that makes Naga quiet and increases the amount I get, I have no reason to complain.

"Now, as for the rest... where did you hide all the things you've stolen so far? Spit it out!"

I dragged the tied-up Shreiker to her feet and ripped off her gag.

“...It seems it’s all over...”

“Exactly. If 'refinement' is your motto, don't make a pathetic, vulgar struggle. Just tell us where the treasure is hidden.”

“...Understood...” she said solemnly, letting out a sigh.

“...To hide a leaf, use a forest... To hide money, use money... Everything we’ve stolen so far is kept in Warehouse No. 3, where the business's operating funds are stored.”

“Ah, I see,” Marshall said casually, clapping his hands.

“No wonder the operating funds never decreased no matter how many times I failed miserably in business.”

“.....”

“*Whaaaaaaaaat?!*”

Everyone screamed at once.

“...Does that... perhaps... mean...” Shreiker asked with a twitching face.

Marshall smiled brightly.

“It seems I’ve spent all the money you stole. Haha!”

...Don't "haha" me!

In that case! What about my solid life plan of "stealing part of the bandits' treasure and living easy"?!

Shreiker fell to her knees in despair.

“...N-no way... all our hard work until now...?”

“Villains don’t need to work hard!”

Smack! My foot hit Shreiker square in the face out of pure vented anger.

“Don't be so cruel! Miss Lina!”

Daisy stepped in to protect Shreiker... wait...

“...Don't tell me, Daisy, you’ve taken a liking to her...?”

“Isn't it wonderful?! Behind a mask of absolute seriousness, she’s the leader of a bandit group! It feels like a 'flower of evil'! Aah! I want to make her the victim of my romantic fangs!”

“Fine. I’ll allow it. Since villains have no human rights anyway, feel free to use your fangs as much as you want.”

“...W-wait?!”

“Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho. It’s useless to resist, *Shrei-ker-san*.”

“Help meeeeeeeee!”

Watching Shreiker being dragged into the darkness while screaming, I thought to myself:

—Maybe it would have been better for the world if I’d just blown this whole mansion away with a Dragon Slave from the start...

(The Housemaid Might Have Seen It: End)

For the Sake of an Unending Ambition (part 1)

"D-D-DOOOOOOOOOOON!"

A massive stir erupted among the customers inside the shop. They were all staring at the empty nineteenth plate sitting in front of me.

"...Heh..."

Amidst the buzzing whispers and cheers, I wore a look of perfect composure and directed my gaze toward the old man running the shop.

"Alright, give me seconds."

"...I-Impossible...!"

Having lost every trace of color in his face, the old man muttered under his breath.

This was a certain eatery in a certain town. My eyes had landed on a slip of paper posted on the wall the moment I entered the shop to grab some dinner.

Eat ten plates of grilled meat within the time limit and win ten silver coins. Fail, and you pay the full price.

It was the kind of event restaurants often hold, but it was their misfortune to be targeted by me—Lina Inverse, the genius sorceress and warrior!

...Well, granted, there is a theory that being a warrior or a sorceress has absolutely nothing to do with this particular challenge.

Anyway, I jumped into the challenge immediately and cleared ten plates with ease. Then, I went for a second round and had just now finished emptying the nineteenth plate.

...Heh. Getting to eat grilled meat for free *and* getting twenty silver coins on top of it? Talk about lucky!

In any case, clearing the second round was as good as done. The only remaining

problem was—namely—whether or not to go for a third challenge immediately after.

I could probably fit another ten plates in if I tried, but it's not great for the health to gorge yourself until you're completely stuffed. Maybe I should stop at "eighty percent full" and call it a day after this second round...

THUD!

The sound of the shop door flying open interrupted my thoughts. Bathed in the stares of the customers, a young girl about seventeen or eighteen stood in the doorway. She was likely a sorceress, wearing a black mantle over a dark-colored costume. She was a beauty with chestnut hair reaching down to her shoulders, but her refined face was currently masked with nothing but fear and desperation.

"Please! Someone! Someone lend me your strength!"

"What's going on?!"

"What happened?!"

"Tell us the situation first!"

Seeing that the newcomer was a beauty, the men in the shop swarmed around her.

...Good grief. That sad male instinct at work... Wait...

"Hey, old man! What about my meat?!"

I spotted the shopkeeper among the swarming men and shouted at him, to which he replied:

"...N-Now is not the time for that! Look at the state this girl is in! This is no ordinary matter!"

Even as he said it, his eyes told a different story—he clearly wanted to use this distraction to let the whole "ten plates of grilled meat" thing slide into oblivion.

"W-What happened, miss?!"

"My master! My master has been kidnapped! Right there, just now!"

"WHAAAAAAAT?!"

At her sudden declaration, I shouted along with the rest of the customers.

"Let me ask—this kidnapped master of yours, what kind of person are they? Age? Distinguishing features?"

I asked while remaining in my seat. She tried to catch her breath as she answered.

"Um... he’s a small old man with a white goatee. He was wearing a black mantle just like mine."

ALRIIIIIIIGHT!

I shouted inwardly at her answer and stood up from my seat.

"Well, this is certainly no time to be eating leisurely. I’ll help. Lead the way to the scene."

"Th-Thank you so much! It’s this way!"

She was genuinely overjoyed and turned on her heel.

"Hey, old man—I'm coming back for those twenty silver coins tomorrow."

"...Eh...?"

I spoke to the shopkeeper as I passed him by the doorway and followed after her, leaping out into the night wind.

The victim wasn't a woman or a child, but an old man. That meant this was almost certainly a kidnapping for profit! Which meant, if I rescued him safely, I could expect a heap of reward money!

Usually, the kind of people who pull low-success-rate stunts like kidnapping for cash are small-time crooks who aren't very bright. If I could knock them down and get a decent reward out of it, this would be a very "delicious" job indeed!

"Thank you! My name is Famille Renford!"

"I'm Lina. Lina Inverse."

We introduced ourselves as we ran toward the scene. Incidentally, the number of people following us besides me was zero. I suppose they like beauties, but they have no interest in sticking their necks into trouble.

And then—

"...It was around here. This is where Master was taken."

She came to a stop before we had gone very far.

"...In a place like this...?"

I muttered with a frown.

We were still in the middle of town. Houses were clustered tightly around us, and lamp light spilled from their windows. Because there were no taverns or inns nearby, there was almost no foot traffic at this hour, but if even a single scream went up, it would surely draw attention.

Even if the target was just an old man, to kidnap someone in a place like this without causing a scene...

"What did the kidnappers look like?"

"It was dark and happened so fast that I couldn't tell for sure... but there were five or six of them. They were all wearing dark, practical clothes... and their faces were covered with cloth of the same color, showing only their eyes."

"I see... the so-called 'Assassin Style,' huh..."

"Is that what it is? I've never seen an assassin before, so I didn't know... Anyway, before I realized it, they had surrounded us... and one of them had covered Master's mouth from behind."

"They're quite skilled..."

The advantage we sorcerers have over ordinary warriors is, of course, the use of spells. But if someone kills their presence, sneaks up, and covers your mouth from behind, it doesn't matter what spells you can use.

After that, you have to rely on physical combat, but most sorcerers in the world are hopeless at that because they rely on spells for everything. Furthermore, since he's a small old man, his physical strength is easy to guess.

In other words, the moment his mouth was covered from behind, the success of the kidnapping was virtually guaranteed.

However, the kidnappers' mistake was letting Famille escape.

"But you managed to escape safely, Famille."

"Yes. I yelled, 'Master, I'll save you now!' and when the masked men bunched up around Master, I didn't hesitate to dash away."

"You're a real piece of work, aren't you?"

"What are you saying?! If I had tried to fight them, I wouldn't have saved Master—I would have just ended up getting caught too! So I thought the best move was to go get help...!"

"I see... wait, can you not use offensive spells?"

"No. I can use Lighting, Recovery, Purification... things like that... Anyway, I have to save Master somehow... my... my advance payment for my tuition...!"

That's why you're saving him?

...Well... whatever...

Either way, I plan on getting my reward from the Master himself.

But right now, there was no sign of the Master or the attackers, not even a lingering presence nearby.

"Anyway—let's look around. ...What's the Master's name?"

"Dirac."

"Got it. —Master Dirac!"

I began wandering around the vicinity with Famille, calling out the Master's name. Of course, I didn't actually expect to find the kidnappers or the Master that way—

"Mas—"

"—Famille, you don't need to call out anymore."

I cut her off and came to a stop shortly after.

"Eh!"

She stopped and looked at me with a blank expression. It seemed Famille hadn't noticed yet—the countless presences hidden in the darkness, surrounding the two of us.

"...It looks like they've come for us... which means! I know you're hiding there! Come out!"

"Heh heh heh heh..."

"Hee hee hee hee..."

In response to my call, several muffled laughs rose from the darkness.

"...W-What...?"

Famille huddled close to me in fear.

And then—

Several figures in assassin-style clothing drifted out of the darkness like ink.

"Are these the ones?!" Famille cried in surprise. "...No mistake! They're the ones who kidnapped Master!"

Alright. Just as calculated.

I knew full well that calling Dirac's name or wandering aimlessly wouldn't actually find the kidnappers. However, the fact that they pulled off a kidnapping in the middle of town meant they knew this area was deserted at this hour, and furthermore, that they had a place to hide the victim nearby. In other words, their hideout was close by.

So, I figured if we wandered around shouting the Master's name, the culprits might get agitated and come out. It was a move based on that logic. Basically, instead of me finding the enemy, I let the enemy find me.

"The little brat who got away earlier, huh..."

I wondered if this one was the leader. One of the men stepped forward and spoke in a muffled voice.

"It seems she brought a helper..."

"FIREBALL!"

BOOOOOOM!

Cutting off his words, my strike blew several of the enemies away!

Hah! Easy!

I grabbed the leader-type who was twitching on the ground by the collar and hauled him up.

"...So, why don't you tell me everything? Your identity, your objective, and where you took the man you kidnapped earlier."

"...Heh... there's... no way... I can tell you..."

The muffled male voice answered my question.

"...Our... plan... must not... be detected... by anyone..."

"...Oho. So you have no intention of talking no matter what?"

As I spoke, staring at him with a deadpan expression, something fluttered past my eyes.

...Hm?

It was dark, so I couldn't see well, but it was something small, not even as big as a palm—

Before I could realize what it was—

Whoosh.

Riding the wind, countless numbers of them blew toward me and the man!

"...Wha...!?"

Finally realizing what they were, I let out a cry of surprise.

Countless... tree leaves?!

"Heh heh heh heh... This time, we'll admit defeat and withdraw quietly... but we will definitely seize that girl..."

The voice I heard from a distance belonged to the man I was supposed to be holding by the collar.

".....!?"

I hurriedly looked down at my hand. My right hand was pointlessly clutching a small piece of cloth.

Curse you! Since when?!

I hurriedly scanned the area, but Famille was the only one left, standing there in a daze. The people I should have blown away with my spell were gone—not even their presence remained.

To kill my field of vision with leaves and escape in that instant without me even noticing—they are quite the formidable opponents. If I hadn't damaged them with my spell earlier, they would have almost certainly used the leaf distraction to launch an attack. If that had happened... how would the battle have turned out?

"...They got away... huh..."

"Don't just say 'they got away'! We have to chase them!"

I directed a calm gaze at the shouting Famille.

"It's useless... sorry. Those guys aren't ordinary. But... to be targeted by a group like that... Famille... based on their tone, it sounds like you're a target too. Tell me the

truth. Why are you and your Master being targeted?"

"...Even if you ask me that..."

She looked down with a truly troubled face.

"I have no idea... Ah! Could it be?! Is it for the tuition money I paid in advance?!"

"No way. Definitely not that," I said, waving my hand dismissively.

"...But... if it's not the tuition, then what...?" Famille muttered, lost in thought.

She didn't seem to be playing dumb... In that case... maybe...

"Let me ask—was Dirac-san doing some kind of research?"

"Research...?"

She frowned again at the question.

At first, I thought it was just a kidnapping for money, but the story seems to be a bit different. When the culprits appeared earlier, I thought they just showed their faces out of panic, but based on their tone, Famille is also a target. That increases the possibility that their goal is Dirac-san's techniques or research.

While it rarely goes public, it's not at all unusual for various incidents to happen behind the scenes over sorcerous research.

They kidnapped Dirac-san, but he won't talk about his research. So they'll kidnap Famille and use her as a hostage to make him talk—isn't that the gist of it?

"...But... even if you say research..."

"I understand it might be hard to talk about your Master's research to a stranger. But this is important."

"Haaa..."

She gave a vague response to my words.

"...Master might have been doing some kind of research, but... I haven't heard what it was. Master never told me what he was researching until it was finished."

"Hoo... mmm..."

I was hoping to figure out if the research was something profitable... I mean, I thought I could deduce the culprits' objective and identity from it...

"...In that case... there's only one method left."

I said, patting Famille on the shoulder.

Hee...

In the darkness, I sat up halfway in bed. It was the middle of the night.

In the room next door, Famille was likely sleeping peacefully, unaware of anything.

That night, there was a tavern-style dining room on the first floor of the inn we stayed at, but closing time had long passed and the voices of people had died away. Silence was the only thing ruling the night.

—Until just now.

Now, within that unchanging silence, several sharply honed presences were crowding together. Likely the kidnappers from earlier. Since they were targeting Famille, I figured they would make a move eventually... and it looks like they've arrived early.

But that's exactly what I wanted. The reason I specifically got a separate room from Famille was to lure them in. To think they'd fall for it so easily... are they underestimating me, or are they just that confident?

The plan was simple: Let them capture Famille on purpose, follow them, and find the enemy's hideout!

So—I sat up on the bed and waited silently while killing my presence.

Thud... clatter...

From Famille's room next door, I heard the faint sound of a struggle. Shortly after, silence returned to the night.

Judging by the sounds and presences, there were multiple opponents. They likely exited through the window.

Timing it right, I quietly opened my window.

"**Levitation**."

I released the spell and floated softly into the night sky. I scanned the area from among the stars and—

There!

A short distance from the inn, a group was running through a narrow, deserted

alleyway. There were about four or five of them. I couldn't tell for sure at this distance and in this darkness, but Famille was likely among them. I controlled my spell and began tracking them from the air.

They moved stealthily, choosing only backstreets. They were heading toward the area where we first encountered them.

...Just as I thought, their hideout seems to be in that direction.

The group turned left and right through the streets lined with dark houses—

"............!?"

The presence appeared suddenly.

Flash!

Whoa!

I somehow managed to dodge an arrow of cold air created by magic. While steadying myself, I landed on the roof of a nearby house.

I looked toward where the attack came from and saw a figure standing quietly—no, standing *obnoxiously*—on a roof a short distance away!

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! A midnight stroll through the air? What a refined hobby you have, Lina Inverse!"

...Every single time with this...

The strength drained out of my shoulders. Of course, it goes without saying.

The person facing me across the empty air on the roof was the woman in the needlessly revealing costume with spiked shoulder guards. My self-proclaimed rival, the mysterious creature—Naga the Serpent!

"Hmph. I don't know what twist of fate brought us here, Lina! But now that we've met..."

"**Freeze Arrow**."

CRACK-THUD!

With a single spell, the living midnight noise was successfully silenced.

—However—

When I looked back at the street, the group was already gone.

"Wait a minute?! What was that for?!"

"That's my line!"

I shouted back the moment Naga thawed out and started complaining.

"...I bet you ran out of travel money again and ended up staying with them for some weird reason, and they talked you into stalling me."

"—Them? What are you talking about?"

Naga frowned and asked back.

...Huh...? Usually, she doesn't play dumb like this... which means...?

"Hmph. You're still naive, Lina Inverse! I simply didn't have the money for an inn, so I used my power to seize the doghouse at a house nearby—someone named Cramer's place—to sleep in! I was feeling unusually lonely and was gazing at the night sky when I saw you and called out! How's that?!"

"...I mean... you ask 'how's that,' but..."

Are you actually just lonely?

"—Wait, so you mean you can't even call out to someone without firing an ice arrow at them first?!"

"Hmph. It seems you still don't understand, Lina. That was clearly just a bit of light communication!"

"...Oho... well then, you won't complain if I give you a bit of 'light communication' here too, then. Naturally."

"...A-Actually, excessive communication can sometimes be annoying to the other person, Lina."

".....Fine, whatever. More importantly, the problem is that because you interfered, I lost sight of them."

"Them?"

"Yeah. Actually..."

I gave Naga a brief explanation of the events since evening.

"...And that's how I lost sight of Famille."

After hearing my story, Naga flipped her hair.

"Hmph! I see! Lina, so you're involved in that kidnapping case?!"

"...That kidnapping case...?"

I frowned, and Naga puffed out her chest even further.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! It seems you don't know about that incident, Lina!"

"Do you actually know something?! Naga?!"

Her appearance and personality are... well, what they are, but Naga's mysterious information network is quite formidable. It would be lucky if I could get some info...

In response to my question, Naga puffed out her chest even more.

"Hmph. Well, if you say 'please tell me' and ask nicely, I might consider telling you! Ho-ho—"

THUD!

Taking a stone the size of a baby's head—thrown without a word—square in the face, Naga tumbled over. I walked up to her while she was twitching and said:

"Please tell me."

"...Fine... I... I get it..."

Still twitching a bit, Naga sat up.

"...I heard... that kidnapping cases have been frequent around here lately... According to the rumors, the culprits wear dark green clothes similar to assassin style..."

Now that she mentioned it—it was dark so I couldn't be sure, but I felt like their clothes weren't pure black either.

"—Serial kidnappings... so, what's the common link between the victims? For example, are they all people researching sorcery?"

"Hmph. Foolish question. If there were such an obvious link, it would have been solved by now. The victims... apparently no children, but men and women of all ages, almost indiscriminate. Of course, there seem to be sorcerers, but there are non-sorcerers too. The only real common point is that they were all snatched while they were traveling."

"...While traveling... huh..."

I frowned at that.

Kidnappers looking for travel money... seems a bit too large-scale for that...

Well, "it's easier to bear than to fear." I just have to find them, knock them down, and make them talk.

"Anyway, Naga, I lost Famille because of you, so you're going to help me. For free."

"Wait, Lina! For free? That’s too much—"

"Would you rather sleep in a doghouse?"

".....Hmph... well... if you insist that much, I suppose I could settle for three meals and lodging."

Alright. Now I can work Naga to the bone for free.

Well, usually, having Naga on your side is more of a negative than a positive... but Naga, like a pair of scissors, is all about how you use her.

Using her as a shield, or sending her in alone while I escape... depending on the situation, she can actually be useful—sometimes... maybe...

...Actually, maybe I should have reconsidered...

"—But Lina, helping is fine, but do you have any clues? You lost sight of that girl, Famille, right?"

"...Well, I took some precautions."

I began walking down the street.

"? Wait, Lina?"

Naga followed behind with a suspicious look.

Eventually—

"Alright. Found it."

I muttered, picking up a small pebble from the ground with a red thread lightly wrapped around it.

"...What’s that...?"

"A signal from Famille. It means, 'I passed through here.'"

Even if Naga hadn't interfered earlier, there was a good chance the kidnappers would

have noticed my movements and tried to hinder me. That's why I had Famille cooperate and drop these markers along the way.

"Hmph. I see—"

Naga nodded at my words—

"—Wait a minute! If you had a trick like that, why do I have to take responsibility and work for free?!"

"I told you already. It’s for the responsibility of *making* me lose sight of her. The fact that I had another plan is a separate issue. So, you’re going to help me look for stones like this."

"....."

With a somewhat unsatisfied expression, Naga began looking for stones in silence. Or maybe she just really didn't want to go back to the doghouse...

Tracing the stones dropped here and there, the two of us eventually arrived in front of a house. It had a large gate and a spacious garden. Behind the gate was a magnificent three-story building.

—However—

The closed iron gate was covered in rust, and the unkempt garden and the main house covered in ivy and moss clearly indicated that this was an abandoned house.

But the pebble with the thread—the marker Famille had dropped—was definitely lying in front of the gate.

Just to be sure, I searched a bit further down the road, but the pebble in front of this house was indeed the last one.

"...Just as I thought... it looks like this is the enemy hideout... Let’s go, Naga."

"Hmph. Got it."

Naga and I chanted a spell—

"**Levitation!**"

We leaped over the wall using the flight spell and entered the grounds. We passed through the overgrown garden and reached the entrance shortly after.

"—Naga, there are some capable fighters among them, so be careful."

"Hmph. Got it."

I couldn't tell if she really understood, but she gave a casual response. I put my hand on the entrance door and pushed. Without making a creaking sound, the door slowly opened. It wasn't locked.

—I see—

So they know we're here.

In that case—there's no need to sneak around.

I chanted a spell under my breath—

"**Lighting.**"

I threw the created magical light into the air, illuminating the room.

It was a fairly large entrance hall. The plaster on the walls was peeling off, and pieces of wood and other debris were scattered around.

—It certainly *looked* like an abandoned house.

However, the smell was different. If it were a real abandoned house, it would have a "decayed smell"—a mix of dampness, mold, and dust—but this lobby didn't have that.

In other words, this wasn't an abandoned house; someone had intentionally messed it up to make it look like one.

But if they think they can fool me with such a cheap trick, they're dead wrong!

"This is the second time tonight I'm saying this, but I know you're hiding there!"

The moment I shouted,

THUD!

The entrance door slammed shut with a loud bang behind Naga and me.

And then—

"...I thought I had truly shaken you off... you did well to track us down..."

Along with those words, a man in dark green assassin-style clothing emerged from the hallway at the back of the hall. Judging by the voice, he was the leader-type from before.

"But... we cannot let you interfere with our plan! Rot and wither here!"

At his signal, one after another, men in assassin gear emerged from the hallways leading into the hall from all sides!

(For the Sake of an Unending Ambition: To be continued!)

For the Sake of an Unending Ambition (part 2)

Synospis

While eating at a small village tavern, Lina is accosted by a pair of siblings, **Lucy and Eysis**, who claim to be the "Twin Devils." They are furious because Lina "stole" their job by blowing up a zombie-infested cave they were hired to clear. When they demand compensation, Lina and Naga soundly defeat them in a series of magical duels.

Later that evening, the siblings propose a "fair" challenge: a race to find a legendary orb hidden in a nearby unmapped ruin. Lina suspects a trap but agrees, smelling profit. After outsmarting the siblings' plan to use them as "trap-clearers," Lina and Naga reach the inner sanctum first by digging their own tunnel. Lina claims the orb—a valuable magical artifact—just as the ruin begins to collapse.

Though Lina believes she has won, the story ends with a shocking betrayal: Naga, hired by the siblings behind Lina's back, paralyzes Lina with a lightning spell and makes off with the prize.

"It’s you people!"

"...Wha-glub?"

At the sound of that voice echoing from the doorway, I turned around with a strand of spaghetti still hanging from my mouth.

It was a tiny eatery in a tiny village. The gaze of every sparse customer in the shop was fixed on the entrance. Standing there were a man and a woman, both around twenty years old. From the look of them, they were both mercenaries.

Well, that didn't matter much.

The problem was that their eyes were locked dead-on at our table.

"Are they acquaintances of yours, Lina?"

In response to Naga’s question from across the table, I slurped up the hanging noodle with a loud *chururu* and shook my head violently.

While I was busy chewing and swallowing, the two of them marched straight over to our table with heavy thumps.

"It was you, wasn't it?! You're the ones who blew up that zombie nest to the West... no, the East!"

"Eh?"

Hearing something that actually rang a bell, I looked at them again. Matching white light armor and longswords at their hips. I thought they might be lovers, but looking closer, they both had the same shade of blonde hair—his short, hers semi-long. Their facial features were strikingly similar.

Apparently, they were siblings—brother and sister, or older sister and younger brother, I didn't know which—but they were definitely related.

"It *was* you, wasn't it?"

"...Well... yeah..."

As the man glared at me with a face full of rage, I nodded slowly, not quite understanding the situation.

It all started yesterday evening. I had happened to stop by this village and was called to the Mayor's house for a job. A cave had been discovered to the East, and it was crawling with zombies. They wanted it dealt with. The reward was pathetically small—frankly, a job I couldn't care less about—but the Mayor's wife served a meal that was so delicious I ended up accepting the task in exchange for the recipe.

Of course, I had no intention of honestly crawling into a cave of unknown depth to hunt down an unknown number of zombies one by one. I simply dragged the Mayor along as a witness and wiped out the cave and every zombie inside with a single **Dragon Slave**.

After that, I returned to the village with the Mayor, collected the pittance of a reward, and was just about to finish lunch before heading out when these two burst in.

"I knew it! What are you gonna do about this, huh?! You snatched our job right out from under us!"

"Snatched?"

I frowned at the man's provocative choice of words.

"—That’s exactly right—"

With a theatrical gesture, the woman brushed her hair back and stepped forward.

"Our client was different, though. We were hired by the Mayor of the village to the East of here. He told us to deal with the zombies in the cave and bring back proof of the deed."

"But then!" the man shouted. "You went and blew up the whole cave! Now we’ve got no proof, which means no reward! That's why we tracked you down!"

"...Just to complain?"

"No!" The man puffed out his chest. "To make you pay us back for our lost wages!"

...Wha...?!

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Before I could even shout, Naga—who had somehow climbed onto the neighboring table—looked down at them, puffed out her chest, and let out a long, boisterous laugh.

"You certainly are amusing! Supporting Character One and Supporting Character Two!"

"Wha...!"

"What did you say?!"

As they bristled, Naga continued to look down on them arrogantly.

"Double-booked requests? Beaten to the punch? Hmph! How naive! If you’re going to get angry over every little thing like that, you’ll never survive in this cutthroat business!"

"Go for it, Naga! Tell 'em like it is!"

Encouraged by my cheering, she puffed her chest out even further and pointed at me.

"Why, I’ve been forced to drink the bitter brew of defeat by this Lina here more times than I can count!"

You didn't need to mention that.

"But even so, it would be childish to be cold to her, so I still act as her friend to this day! What do you think of that?!"

Who's a friend? You meal-mooching woman.

"...Uh... I don't really know how to comment on that..."

In contrast to the man’s bewildered stammering, the woman stepped forward without a change in expression.

"In short—to put it simply—you have no intention of apologizing to us?"

"Pretty much."

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! Why on earth would such a thing be necessary?!"

As Naga and I gave our firm replies, the woman allowed a small smile to play on her lips.

"...Hmph... I see we’ve been quite underestimated... To speak such words to Lucy and Eysis, the ones feared and loathed as the 'Twin Devils'..."

Ah. So they *were* siblings.

"...Which means..."

I thought about Lucy's (presumably her name) words for a moment.

"In short, you were hated in your village, so you ran away and started doing this."

"Don't go straight for the heart of the matter!" Lucy protested.

Actually, it happens a lot. People who don't fit into their village or town and end up drifting into work as "Adventurers."

Just to be clear, I’m different. Just in case you were wondering.

"Anyway—if that's how it is, I suppose we’ll have to make you understand. Exactly how terrifying we are. Step outside!"

At Lucy’s declaration of war, Naga and I looked at each other—and simultaneously gave a small shrug.

"**Dill Brand!**"

BOOM!

"Ahi-fuuuuuu!"

With a hilarious scream, Eysis was blown back by my attack and slammed into the ground. Lucy, meanwhile, was watching from the sidelines, claiming she "didn't need to lift a finger." Eysis had tried to act cool, saying he "didn't make a habit of hurting

women," and... well, this was the result.

"...Heh... seems you've got a little bit of skill..."

Eysis pulled himself up unsteadily.

"My bad. I underestimated you because you're a girl. But if that's the case..."

"**Explosion Arrow!**"

K-BOOM!

"Noi-hyyaaaaaa!"

Thud.

The sound of Eysis hitting the dirt again. He pulled himself up once more.

"...Now that's... more like it... A worthy opponent..."

Oh, he's stubborn. In that case—

"**Fireball!**"

WHOOSH-BOOM!

Plop.

"—Hey! What are you doing, Eysis?!"

"...Heh... hehe... Lucy..."

At Lucy's scolding, Eysis staggered up.

"...I'm starting to get the feeling... that I'm at a serious disadvantage here..."

"What are you being so weak for?! When you're hurting, your opponent is hurting just as much! That's what battle is!"

...Is that so? Because I'm not hurting at all.

"...Hehe... you're right... I almost lost my nerve there..."

He actually bought it. This guy.

Eysis gripped his sword again.

"Listen up! I'm settling this with the next one! Here I..."

"One more **Dill Brand**."

Z-DOOOON!

Again, he was blown away, landing right next to Lucy.

"...D-Dammit, why...?"

As Eysis groaned, advice flew from Lucy.

"Your wrist flick was too weak!"

Is that a wrist issue? Really?

"Hang in there, Eysis! Just one more push!"

"Heh... I guess I really can't lay a hand on a woman after all... Lucy, you take over and finish this quick."

I thought he'd be easily tricked again, but it seemed his body finally stopped moving, so he passed the baton to Lucy.

"...I suppose it can't be helped."

With a small sigh, Lucy stepped forward.

"The conditions aren't fair. Let's change the method of our competition."

"**Flare Arrow!**"

D-D-D-D-D-D-D!

"Nyaaaaaaaa!"

The volley I unleashed silenced Lucy completely.

"Found you!"

The sound of the door swinging open and Eysis's voice ringing through the shop happened that same evening. We were having a slightly early dinner at a tavern in the neighboring village.

.....

Clatter.

"Wait... Wait a minute!"

Eysis waved his hands frantically, perhaps seeing the vein throbbing on my forehead as I stood up in silence.

"N-fufu. You’re noisy. I have no intention of listening to any more of your sleep-talk."

"Even if we told you there’s a treasure involved?"

Twitch.

"Treasure?"

Naga and I spoke in perfect harmony at Lucy’s words.

"It seems you’re finally in the mood to listen."

The two of them walked over, still a bit cautious, and sat in the empty chairs at our table.

"Just so you know—order your own food," I said, checking Eysis as he reached for a piece of fried chicken. I turned my gaze to Lucy. "...And?"

She lowered her voice.

"The reason we came to this village in the first place was because we got information about an unmapped ruin sleeping nearby. Deepest inside that ruin, there’s supposed to be a legendary orb."

"...Sounds a bit fishy to me."

"So... how about a contest? Two against two. Which of us gets the orb first. If you get it first, it's yours. However—if we get it first, we take all the treasure you find in the ruin, plus the apology you owe us from the last village, plus the medical fees for blowing us up with spells. How about it?"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! How amusing! Who would ever—"

"Sure, fine by me."

"...Eh?"

Naga let out a dumbfounded sound at my easy agreement.

"...L-Lina, wait...!"

"Then it’s settled." Lucy stood up. "Going now is... well, it's night, so that's reckless. Let’s meet here tomorrow morning."

"Okay."

"Heh... you've got guts. I’ll settle the score next time."

Throwing out a parting shot that implied the previous scores *hadn't* been settled, Eysis

stood up as well.

"Well then, I look forward to it. Oho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Leaving the echo of her high-pitched laughter behind, the two left the shop.

"...Lina, what are you thinking? Dealing with those two over and over."

"Dealing with... You’re the one to talk?"

"Hmph! That last laugh lacked beauty! Why would I, Naga the Serpent, need to take an opponent who can only laugh like that seriously?!"

"...Well, whatever. Anyway, if this is a trap and it’s all a lie, I’ll just beat them up and take 'consolation' money later. If it's real and we get the orb first, it’s all profit."

"And what if it turns out to be some cheap piece of junk like usual?"

"...!"

For a moment, I was speechless at her hitting the nail on the head.

"In that case... I'll just say 'This isn't real treasure' and take their belongings as a penalty for lying... no, I mean, I will 'involuntarily receive compensation' from them."

"Hmph! I see, then everything will be settled nicely for everyone—except those two!"

"Exactly."

"Then tonight is a pre-victory celebration!"

"That’s fine, but... I hope you have enough on you to pay for a 'celebration'..."

At my words, Naga simply offered a silent, twitching smile.

"This is the place."

The next day, guided by Lucy and Eysis, Naga and I arrived at a spot in the mountains a short distance from the village.

"This place? Where exactly?" Naga muttered, looking around.

At first glance, there was nothing. Just a towering cliff and endless green trees. Well, if it was an "unmapped" ruin, that made sense. If there were a big sign saying "Ruin Entrance," it would have been looted ages ago.

Lucy looked around in silence for a while. "Here. No mistake." She pointed to a spot on the cliff. "If we dig here a bit, the entrance should appear. So, you two are going

to help."

Eysis took shovels off his back and handed one to each of us.

...Wait...

"You're joking. That’s too much work." I tossed the shovel aside.

"Are you telling us to dig by ourselves?"

"Basically, we just need a hole here, right?"

I walked to the spot Lucy pointed to, placed my right hand on the cliff, and chanted.

"**Dug Haut**."

Using the tunnel-digging spell, I easily punched a hole into the cliff side.

"...You have some convenient magic," Lucy said, looking impressed.

Inside the hole, just as Lucy said, a large set of double iron doors appeared.

"Alright, I’m opening it."

I declared to the group and chanted once more.

"**Dam Brass!**"

With a loud crushing sound, the iron doors buckled and blew inward.

"Well then. Shall we?"

"Not 'shall we,'" Lucy stopped me. "Listen. You might have forgotten, but this is a contest. To see who gets the orb first. If we all go in together like a happy little group, there's no point."

"Hmph! Don't tell me you're planning to say something as selfish as 'let us go first'?"

Lucy shook her head slowly with a smug smile.

"No. Since we're the ones who proposed the challenge, we’ll let *you* go first. We’ll start after a bit of time. Good luck."

Eysis stood beside her, also wearing a confident smirk.

...Ho-hooo...

"Hmph. Do you really think you can win regardless? I, Naga the Serpent, have been quite underestimated! But don't you dare complain after you lose."

"You're the ones who had better keep your promise when you lose."

"Hmph! Of course, at that time, *someone* will take responsibility! Lina will!"

"Hey, hold on..."

...Well, whatever...

"Anyway—Naga, let's head out."

I stepped forward into the ruins.

"**Lighting.**"

A small sphere of light illuminated the pitch-black ruins. Stone walls mottled with moss. Air that smelled cold and damp. Aside from the area lit by the sphere I sent ahead, I couldn't see anything. For now, the path stretched straight ahead.

"...Hey, Naga..." I whispered.

"What is it, Lina?"

"Keep your voice down. I need your help with something..."

As we whispered, the straight corridor eventually took a sharp turn to the left.

"...Those two seem to have gotten quite far ahead..."

"...Don't lose track of them..."

In the darkness, the whispers of Lucy and Eysis could be heard. The soft sound of muffled footsteps passed through the dark.

After waiting for a while...

"...It’s fine now, Naga. But don't speak loudly."

I stepped away from the rock wall I had been hugging and whispered.

Yes, it was simple. As soon as we turned the corner, I sent the magical light forward by itself while Naga and I clung to the wall, hiding in the darkness. We simply let Lucy and Eysis pass right by us.

"...What is the meaning of this, Lina?"

"In short—they intended to have us act as their 'pioneer' (shield)."

The moment Lucy told us to go first, it clicked. In these cases, the one who goes first

usually hits all the traps. However, looking at the soil around the iron doors, it was clear the entrance hadn't been buried recently. That meant they couldn't have set traps inside themselves.

"If this ruin was meant to hide treasure, there will naturally be plenty of traps. They let us go first so we'd trigger them all or disarm them, and then they'd safely follow behind. At the very end, they'd dash past us, snatch the treasure, and gloat about how it feels to have a job stolen."

As if on cue...

"HYO-NO-WAAAAAA!"

A scream echoed from deeper in. They either hit a trap or met a monster.

"I see."

"Right? They're moving without caution because they think it's safe since we're supposedly ahead of them."

"That's fine, but Lina, what are we going to do?"

"Hmm. Well, we could just do exactly what they planned to do to us, but that lacks style..."

I thought for a moment.

"—Oh, I know!" I clapped my hands.

—How much time passed after that?—

Creak...

With a heavy, rusted sound, the iron door sealing the final room was opened.

"Finally—"

Lucy and Eysis, now thoroughly battered and bruised, started to say something before losing their words.

In the back of the room stood a giant beast statue. Before it was a pedestal with intricate carvings. Atop the pedestal—as if guarded by the statue—sat a brilliantly shining orb.

However, they didn't freeze because they were moved by the sight.

The reason was likely...

"Oh. You’re late."

Being greeted by us, looking thoroughly bored next to the pedestal, left them with their mouths hanging open. Apparently, they didn't think we could have beaten them there.

"Honestly... we got tired of waiting..." Naga said, stifling a yawn.

"Wh... Why are you people here?!" Eysis asked, his voice shaking with shock.

"Why...? Because we got here first, obviously," I answered innocently.

"That’s impossible! Every door on the way was locked, every trap was triggered, and there were monsters everywhere! ...Wait! Did you set the traps back up and release monsters after you passed through?!"

"We did no such thing," I said, waving my hands at Lucy’s wild theory. "But honestly, I thought the 'treasure' you mentioned would be junk... but I was wrong. This is actually something quite special."

I looked at the glowing orb. A **Mana Sphere**—an orb used for large-scale ritual magic like temporary weather manipulation. For someone like me who loves offensive spells, it wasn't particularly interesting, but it certainly wasn't cheap.

"Price-wise... let's see, you could buy two or three small houses with land and furniture included."

"WHAAAAAAAAT?!" Lucy and Eysis screamed in unison.

"So, as promised, we’re taking this."

I reached out and casually picked up the orb.

"Wait just a..."

As they tried to stop me—

RUMBLE!

A massive tremor shook the ruin!

"Wha...?!"

"What is this?!"

"What do you think? It's obvious."

I began walking with the orb, speaking in a matter-of-fact tone.

"It’s the classic ruin trap. The 'Final Trap' that activates the moment the treasure is taken."

As I spoke, the ground continued to rumble and shake.

"...Final Trap... which means...?"

I nodded at Lucy's murmur.

"The ruin is collapsing, isn't it?"

"WAAAAAAAGH!"

Lucy and Eysis immediately bolted out the door.

...I get the feeling they won't make it in time at that speed...

"Well then, Naga, we should probably get out of here too."

"Hmph. Right."

The two of us turned on our heels and walked toward the back of the room, behind the beast statue. There, a black hole gaped in the wall.

Yes, it was simple. After letting Lucy and Eysis pass us, we went back outside, followed the exterior wall of the buried ruin, and used **Dug Haut** to dig our own tunnel through the earth.

Thus, we bypassed every trap, door, and monster and reached the bottom floor with ease.

It’s a trick you can't use when you're looking for *something* hidden "somewhere" in a ruin, but for "treasure in the depths," it's almost always at the deepest point. In this case, it was the perfect method.

"Well, maybe those two will learn their lesson now."

"Hmph. If they make it out alive, that is."

Exchanging dialogue that made us sound like total villains, Naga and I climbed back through our tunnel.

—Listening to the sound of the ruin collapsing behind us—

"You...!"

"**Dill Brand!**"

BOOM!

The next day.

The moment we met on the road and Eysis tried to say something, I blew him away with a spell without a word.

"Wh... What are you doing?! All of a sudden!"

At Lucy’s protest, I gave a small sigh.

"Since it’s you people, I figured if you survived, you’d find out how we got there and say 'I don't accept such cowardly methods! Give us our orb!' or something, right?"

"..."

I must have hit the bullseye. Lucy wiped sweat from her forehead.

"...Hmph... to think you read us that far... I suppose letting Eysis talk first was the right choice..."

Don't use your own twin as a shield.

"Fine. If you’ve read our hand this far, it can't be helped. Let's make a legitimate trade."

"By 'legitimate trade,' you mean you'll try to buy this orb for a pittance, right?"

"Ugh!"

Bullseye again.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! How amusing, Lucy! Such sweet tricks won't work on Lina, who does that kind of fraud and extortion on a daily basis!"

At Naga’s slanderous words, Lucy gave a small snort.

"I don't recall asking for an opinion from a mere hanger-on."

".....Hanger-on...?"

I could almost hear the sound of a vein popping on Naga's forehead. I took a step or two back. Lucy continued, oblivious.

"That’s right! I mean, what is with that weird outfit? It’s obvious you're covering up a lack of skill with flashy looks! And your sense of style is the worst! Especially that..."

"**Dill Brand!**"

WHOOSH-BOOM!

"Noguuuuu..."

Naga’s indiscriminate blast blew Lucy away.

Hah. Foolish. When Naga gets serious, she doesn't distinguish between friend and foe. The only safe place is right next to her—the one and only blind spot of her wild spells. Though she didn't know it, she was unfortunate...

Anyway, the incident ended, and I had successfully obtained the orb—

Or so I thought. At that time.

"Hey Lina, we need to talk."

Naga visited my room at the inn two days later.

"What is it? You're being awfully formal."

This was rare. Usually, if she wanted to talk, we’d do it while eating at the tavern. To visit my room at night...

"The truth is, Lina, there’s something I want to say..."

Naga stood by the door as I sat on the bed.

"What do you want to say?"

"That is..."

Her voice trailed off.

"What? It’s rare for you to hesitate."

"..."

"Just say it clearly."

The moment I started to lift myself off the bed, Naga spoke. Clearly.

"**Mono Volt!**"

CRACKLE-SPARK!

"Uba-buuuuuu!"

Caught directly in the raging storm of lightning, I couldn't even let out a proper scream before I slumped onto the bed. It was a spell that unleashed low-damage electricity over a wide area. Even so, if you took it head-on, your body wouldn't move for a while.

Naga walked over to my twitching form, rummaged through the bag next to the bed, and pulled out the orb.

"Hmph. Don't hate me, Lina. This is a job, after all."

Saying something nonsensical, she left with the orb. Which meant the ones who hired Naga were... Lucy and Eysis!

"Well then, Lina, don't think too badly of me. Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

I WILL THINK BADLY OF YOU! CURSE YOU PEOPLE! JUST YOU WAIT!

Listening to the echo of Naga's laughter as she left the room, I lay on the bed and swore a solemn vow of revenge.

(The Orb in My Hands: TO BE CONTINUED)

Next Episode Preview

Lina has been easily robbed of the orb by Lucy and Eysis, who managed to win Naga over to their side! Will she be able to take it back?! Lina's retaliation begins, and it will stain the earth the color of blood! (No it won’t, it won’t.)

Next time: **"The Orb in My Hands" (Part 2)**.

In whose hands will the orb end up?!

The Orb in My Hands (Part 2)

Synopsis

One day, in a certain place, the twin adventurers Lucy and Eysis pick a fight with Lina and Naga. They challenge Lina to a race to find a treasure in some ruins—but they suffer a crushing defeat. The treasure orb falls into Lina's hands. Just when it seems everything is over, Naga is bought off by the twins and betrays Lina, snatching the orb away! Now, to take back the treasure and smack down anyone who stands in her way, Lina's pursuit begins!

Clouds drift by. The sun dips. A deserted highway cuts through the forest. The overgrown weeds and the branches pressing in from both sides make the path feel incredibly gloomy the moment the light fades. Three figures hurry along this lonely road.

"Hmph. To think things would go this smoothly..."

One of the shadows—Lucy, in her mercenary gear—spoke with a small smirk.

"It’s all thanks to having you on our side," Eysis added, flattering her.

Naga puffed out her chest grandly. "Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! For I, Naga the Ser—"

ZUGODOOOON!

Before she could finish her sentence, a single blast of attack magic blew Naga right off her feet! She spun through the air and hit the ground with a thud, twitching. Lucy and Eysis stood there frozen, unable to comprehend what had just happened.

"So, anyway, I thought I'd start things off by blowing her away..."

At the sound of a familiar voice from behind, they spun around as if spring-loaded.

"Wha... What?!"

"How are you here?!"

They screamed in shock at the sight of me—Lina Inverse—standing there calmly.

"Isn't it obvious? I’ve come to take back the orb you swiped."

"B-but how did you know where we were...?"

"Hmph. Simple." I began counting off on my fingers. "First: to you, that orb is nothing

more than a 'pricey magic item.' Second: you naturally expected me to chase you. Third: your goal isn't to 'own' treasure, but to turn it into cash. Taking all that into account, there's only one place to go: the nearest big city with a Mage Guild or magic shops where you can sell it quickly for a good price. And to dodge me, you'd head there straight down the backroads. Basically, this route. See? Simple, right? Once I figured that out, I had plenty of ways to catch up."

I said all this with a very smug, authoritative air.

"Grr...!"

"I see... put that way, it is a simple deduction," Lucy said, regaining her composure. She stepped forward. "But just because you found us doesn't mean you've won!"

"Yeah... that's right!" Eysis drew his sword and struck a pose. "I haven't lost yet! Don't think I'm the same man as before... Since the day you beat me, I've done a thousand practice swings every single day...!"

"**Dill Brand!**"

BOOM!

Before his grand speech could finish, my spell sent Eysis flying. He looked up while twitching. "...D-dammit, why...? After all that hard work..."

Hard work? What are practice swings supposed to do against a magic attack? Talk about 'useless effort'...

"I told you! You should have practiced side-to-side shuttle runs instead!" Lucy yelled, giving him some bizarre advice.

"Anyway, whether it’s shuttle runs or a hundred sprints, do what you want... but for now—" I stepped forward and held out my hand. "Give it back. The orb."

Lucy remained calm and puffed out her chest. "Actually—how about we resolve this as peacefully as possible through a discussion..."

"Like hell we can! **Dill Brand!**"

K-BOOM!

Lucy went flying beautifully. *If you're going to propose a discussion, don't start a fight in the first place!* Anyway, that took care of them. All that was left was to search their belongings and reclaim the orb—or so I thought.

"**Freeze Arrow!**"

At the sound of a voice from the side, I dashed forward! Countless arrows of cold air pierced the ground right where I had been standing. I looked back—and there, of course, was Naga, having already recovered!

"Hmph! You dodged that well, Lina!"

"Well, I know exactly how fast you recover."

We glared at each other for a moment.

"**Fire Arrow!**"

"**Freeze Arrow!**"

The two spells collided between us and dissipated in a burst of steam and flame. In the split second our vision was obscured, I moved to a new position while chanting. The moment I saw Naga again:

"**Dill Brand!**"

A spiral vortex tore across the earth, but before it could hit her:

"**Mega Brand!**"

Naga cast a spell to create earth dolls! The ground mounded up, blocking the path of my vortex.

CRASH!

My spell blew apart the half-formed golems. I had destroyed them before they could manifest—but my spell hadn't damaged Naga either. *A stalemate?* I thought.

Suddenly, the ground all around began to squirm and mound up!

What?!

Before my eyes, the earth took human shape, and over a dozen golems—about the size of children—emerged.

Curse you, Naga! She modified the spell to create multiple small golems instead of one big one!

Naga pointed at me and gave the command. "Go, my golems!"

I charged straight toward the approaching golems while chanting my next spell. Naga’s laughter rang out.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! It seems you’ve lost your edge, Lina! Even if they're small, a golem

is a golem! Do you think you can handle them in close combat... wait, what?"

Before she could finish, her jaw dropped. I had run right through the middle of the dozen golems. They didn't even look at me; they just kept marching forward.

"Wait! What's going on?!"

What's going on? You gave a terrible, vague command.

Golems have zero flexibility. Since she pointed in one direction and told them to 'Go,' they would keep 'going' that way regardless of whether I slipped past them.

"S-stop! Golems! Get Lina... wait, they won't understand that... Get that woman—!"

Before she could finish, my spell was ready. I spun around to face the golems behind me.

"**Fireball!**"

K-BOOM!

The blast centered right in the middle of the group, wiping out the mini-golems. Immediately, I began my next chant. Naga, however, was faster.

"**Mega Brand!**"

Another golem spell? Meanwhile, I was chanting **Vice Freeze**. Even for someone who recovers as fast as Naga, being frozen solid would keep her still for a while. If I froze her, then finished the golems, I could search for the orb in peace.

Ignoring the mounding earth around me, I finished my chant.

"**Vice...!**"

Before I could release it... *rustle*...

What appeared around me were dozens of tiny golems, no taller than my shins, looking like little stone ornaments. They looked like they'd break if I stepped on them, but there were at least a hundred of them.

".....?!"

I was so stunned by the sight that I froze for a second.

"Golems! Run around that woman's feet!"

What?!

The tiny golems immediately began swarming around my legs. *Eww! This is actually*

really creepy! They didn't have much power, but if I used a spell like **Vice Freeze**, I'd freeze my own feet too. If I tried to walk, I'd trip.

Uh... uh...

Before I could think of a solution:

"How's that? You can hardly move, right?" Naga began chanting. *Crap! If she attacks now...!*

"Let's get out of here!"

A voice shouted from the side before Naga could finish. Lucy and Eysis had recovered and were stumbling into the forest.

"Eh? Wait...!"

Naga looked back and forth between the twins and me. "Wait for me!" she shouted, abandoning the fight to chase after them.

Damn! If they get into the forest, it'll be impossible to track them! It's dark and visibility is low. If only I could search from the air—

Wait... from the air?

It only just occurred to me that I could have escaped the tiny golems simply by floating away.

The tavern was filled with the smell of alcohol and food. I found them at a table in the back.

"Found you!"

The shop went dead silent. Everyone looked at me.

"Y-you?!" Eysis stood up, knocking his chair over.

"Hmph! You found us easily, Lina!"

I gave the same answer I gave yesterday. "Once I found you once, you'd change your route—expecting me to think that, you stayed on the original route to trick me. You didn't think I'd see through such a basic bluff?"

"Heh... I see... you saw through our double-bluff... you're good..." Eysis sweated under the pressure.

Truthfully, I just went around asking people if they'd seen a woman in a crazy outfit.

Naga’s costume is so distinctive it’s impossible to miss. If I told them that, I might get a funny reaction, but I kept it to myself just in case they tried to run again.

"Hmph. It seems we really have to fight you seriously," Lucy said, standing up and reaching for her sword. I'd never actually seen her fight seriously before.

"Uh... excuse me, customers! No trouble in the shop!" the owner protested weakly.

I nodded. "I know. Let’s take this outside."

"Fine by me!" Lucy snapped.

"Hurry, hurry! Move it!"

"Shh! Quiet, Eysis!"

The back door slammed open.

"Yo."

CRASH!

Lucy and Eysis fell flat on their faces at the sight of me casually waving.

"Wha! Why are you here?!" Lucy screamed.

We were currently in the back alley by the kitchen entrance.

"Why? Because I figured your personality would lead you here. As soon as I 'went outside,' I dashed around to the back."

"You tricked us!"

"You were going to do the same..."

"It was only an 'attempted' trick, so the crime is lighter!" she talked some nonsense. "Anyway, we’ll just have to remove you by force! Go, Naga-san! ...Wait, where is she?"

Lucy turned around, but Naga wasn't there.

"Naga isn't coming. She either went to the front like an idiot... or she's still at the table eating."

"Grr...!" Lucy drew her sword. "Then we’ll just have to do it ourselves! Let’s go, Eysis!"

"Right!"

The twins faced me. "Do you know the term 'Twin Synchronicity'?" Lucy asked

suddenly. "Eysis and I can perform a perfectly synchronized, flawless simultaneous attack!"

I doubted these two had any such "sympathy," but I kept quiet. They charged in, swinging their swords in the exact same rhythm, with the exact same movements.

Synchronized sounds nice, but in the real world, it's just called a *predictable attack*. I dodged them both with ease.

"Hah! Hah!"

"Take this! And this!"

They kept attacking in the same rhythm. *I could play with them longer, but my spell is ready.*

"**Dill Brand!**"

BOOM!

They both went flying in the exact same pose.

"I see. So that's Twin Synchronicity," I joked.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!" A familiar laugh echoed from the side. Naga stood at the kitchen door, wiping her mouth with a white napkin.

"Hmph! You might have beaten those two while I was finishing my leftovers, but don't think you've won! As long as I, Naga the Serpent, am here, you aren't getting that orb!"

"Whatever, Naga. You have sauce on your face."

She wiped her mouth. "Anyway! You won't get the orb!"

"**Sleeping.**"

Thud. Zzz...

Naga fell fast asleep. She recovers from damage fast, but her recovery from sleep magic is perfectly normal—especially on a full stomach.

"I'll be taking that back now." I knelt by Lucy and searched her bag.

Bingo! A faintly glowing orb. To a normal person, it's just a glowing crystal, but to a mage, it's a valuable Mana Sphere.

"W-wait... thief..."

"Don't you talk!" I stepped on Eysis's head to silence his groaning and left.

However, knowing those two, they'd keep coming as long as I had the orb.

"So, what to do..." I muttered.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! I've finally caught you, Lina Inverse!"

Two days later, Naga's laughter echoed through the forest.

"I figured you'd show up." I looked at the three of them.

"It was easy to track you. You left clues everywhere," Lucy said.

"You're quite confident! But this ends here! Give back the orb you stole from us!"

"Yeah. Give it up and we won't have to hurt you," Eysis threatened.

I ignored him and looked at Naga. "By the way, Naga, why did you decide to side with these two anyway?"

"Hmph! Simple! They hired me! If we succeed, I get twenty percent of the orb's sale price!"

...*Oh, come on...*

"Listen, Naga..."

"Hmph! Don't think you can talk me out of it!"

"If you split it with me, you'd get fifty percent..."

Time stopped. Naga froze mid-pose. Lucy and Eysis looked panicked.

"Uh..." Naga whispered. She spun around and pointed at the twins. "I'm not going back to your side even if you offer more!"

"Wait, what?!" She froze again as she realized she had just admitted she was considering another betrayal. She turned back to me. "I... I would never betray a contract! Ohohoho!" *Her laugh is cracking...*

"Anyway! Give us the orb!"

"No way!" I dashed to the side, chanting.

"**Fire Arrow!**"

Naga ducked my arrows and slammed her hands into the ground. "**Dug Haut**

(Modified)!"

The dry ground turned into a shallow mud pit. My footing became terrible—but I could use this!

"RAAAAGH!" Eysis swung his sword at me.

"Too slow!" I parried him with my short sword, but in the mud, I slipped and fell flat on my face.

SPLASH!

My clothes are ruined! In the fall, a glowing crystal ball rolled out of my bag.

"Oh no!"

"Yes!" Lucy and Eysis yelled. It rolled onto dry ground. "Eysis, get the orb!"

"Right!"

I tried to get up, but slipped in the mud again. *Eww! The mud is getting in everything!*

Eysis grabbed the crystal ball. He tried to run, but suddenly—it slipped from his hands. It hit the hard, dry ground.

CRACK.

It shattered into pieces.

Silence.

"NOOOOOOOOOO!" I screamed, standing up and pointing at Eysis. "How do you drop it?! That was a treasure, and now it’s just worthless trash!"

"I... uh... I mean..." Eysis stammered, looking at an enraged Lucy. "My hands just slipped..."

Naga looked at him with a low, terrifying laugh. "Whether your hands slipped doesn't matter. What I want to know is... what happens to my fee?"

Eysis flinched and looked at the shards. He picked up a few pieces. "Maybe... twenty percent of these?"

"**Dill Brand**!"

BOOM!

Eysis went flying. *Fool. There are some jokes you just don't tell at certain times.*

I watched in silence as Lucy began stomping on the downed Eysis.

The incident was finally over. Lucy and Eysis left dejectedly, and Naga went to the tavern to drink away her frustrations.

Back in my room at the inn, I sat alone, smiling as I held the orb. The *real* Mana Sphere.

Yes. The one Eysis dropped was a fake. A cheap glass ball I bought, enchanted with a long-lasting light spell and coated in oil so it would be slippery and roll out of my bag easily.

Those two didn't know that a real Mana Sphere is incredibly sturdy; it wouldn't shatter just from being dropped. If it were that fragile, I wouldn't have been blowing people up while it was in my bag.

So, the orb is mine. I'll sell it quietly and maybe buy Naga a drink later.

All's well that ends well!

(The Orb in My Hands: END)

Next Episode Preview

"Freedom in His Hands"

"...Heh heh heh heh..."

A low laugh echoes through the area. Lina frowns, but it's Dirac across the table who kicks his chair back in shock!

"T-that voice?!"

Is it a ghost from his past? A shadow from a secret organization? Or perhaps... a debt collector for unpaid club fees?

Next time: **"Freedom in His Hands"**.

Lina gets dragged into a world of lace, leather, and legendary knitting techniques!

Freedom in His Hands

"...I've finally found you. Dirac Balzac!"

WHOOSH!

Along with the voice, countless black tentacles poured from the ceiling, coiling atop the neighboring table.

"You—!" Dirac stood up, his face pale. Famille half-rose from her seat, trembling.

Before them, the mass of tentacles shivered and then—*SNAP!*—they scattered like whipcracks, revealing a figure within.

It was a tall woman in her early twenties with sun-kissed skin, brilliant blonde hair, and sharp blue eyes. She was dressed in studded bondage gear. She looked less like an "Evil General" and more like a fetish club worker who had shown up to the wrong workplace at the wrong time. She even held a leather whip.

"Ho ho ho ho! It seems you still remember Meldinasa!"

"Master! Who is this?!" Famille cried.

"Famille, stay back!"

"Hmph. So that's your new apprentice? Does she know the truth about you? About the *Organization*?!"

The three stared each other down in a heavy silence... until:

"Hey! You! Give me some kind of reaction!" Meldinasa snapped, pointing at me.

"Mmph?" I finally stopped eating and looked up.

"I went through all the trouble of a flashy entrance! I'm hinting at Dirac's dark past! I'm using ominous words like 'The Organization'! Why are you just sitting there ignoring me and stuffing your face with spaghetti?!"

"Whu do yoo mean...?" I swallowed a stray noodle. "It's free, and this spaghetti is delicious."

"That's not what I asked! I asked why you're ignoring me!"

"Well... if I have to choose between getting involved with someone like you or eating spaghetti, the spaghetti is about 7.5 million times better."

"Why you...!" She turned red with rage. "I don't know what you are to Dirac, but I

won't let that slide! Prepare yourself!"

I stood up and glared back. "Oh? You want to play? Fine. Let’s take this outside."

"With pleasure!" She spun around and marched out.

As soon as she vanished through the door, I sat back down and started slurping my spaghetti again.

"Um... Lina-san?" Dirac asked nervously. "Is it okay to just leave her out there?"

"Don't worry about her. Just ignore her."

"But Master, who was she?" Famille asked. "Is she another student fighting over tuition fees?"

"No," Dirac said firmly. (Wait, *another* one? Does this old man always fight with students over money?) He sighed. "I suppose I should have told you sooner. Lina-san, would you listen as well?"

"No thanks."

"Please! Listen to the ramblings of a lonely old man!" He began weeping.

"Stop crying! I don't want to get involved, and I'm tired of working for free!"

"Then... if you help me, I'll pay a proper request fee. Just hear the story."

"Well... if you're paying..."

Dirac settled into his seat with a distant look in his eyes.

"Before I met Famille... I belonged to an organization. I joined young and underwent grueling, specialized training. Day after day of blood and sweat, performing 'jobs' that never saw the light of day. Eventually, I rose to become one of the three Great Generals. Meldinasa was another. But I grew weary of a life in the shadows. One day, I deserted. I took Famille as my student, hoping for a peaceful life. But the Organization is not so forgiving. Whether they want to punish me as an example or steal the research I took with me... they won't let this go."

"Master... what was this organization called?" Famille asked.

Dirac looked solemn. "The **Gracyde Handicraft Association**. A massive shadow organization that controls the modern fashion industry from the darkness."

"Wow, this spaghetti really is good," I said. "The sauce has a hint of Berimo juice."

"It really is!" Famille agreed. "The fries are good too."

"STOP IGNORING MY STORY!" Dirac screamed.

"Sorry, it just got so ridiculous I couldn't help it," I sighed.

"Even I think that joke was a bit much, Master," Famille added.

"It's not a joke! Over eighty percent of the fashion brands used by royalty and nobility are secretly partnered with the Organization! The amount of money flowing through it every year is in the hundreds of millions of gold coins!"

"**HUNDREDS OF MILLIONS?!**" Famille and I shouted in unison.

"Our primary activity is researching and developing new techniques, designs, and processing methods, then selling that know-how to famous labels. No matter how prestigious a brand is, they can't stay on top forever. They rely on our technical expertise. Of course, they can't admit they buy their skills elsewhere, so the deals are top-secret. Huge 'hush money' payments are involved."

"So, Master, is that where you learned the French Knitting technique?"

"Yes. But some of the techniques I developed were too dangerous to give to them. They must have found my notes and realized I held back the ultimate secrets."

(Dangerous French Knitting? I wanted to comment, but I knew I wouldn't understand the answer even if I asked.)

"Meldinasa specializes in leatherwork. That outfit of hers is likely her own handiwork. Now, listen closely... I must tell you Meldinasa’s secret..."

"ALRIGHT, THAT’S ENOUGH!"

Meldinasa burst back into the shop, panting with rage. We had already finished dinner, had our post-meal tea, and completely forgotten she existed.

"I've been waiting—"

BWA-HAHAHAHAHAHA!

Famille and I burst into hysterical laughter, cutting her off.

"What?! What's so funny?!"

"Pffft... we heard... haha... Dirac told us... your secret!" I gasped between wheezes. "You... you wear that outfit... but you're actually a housewife with two kids?!"

"S-shut up!"

"And," Famille added, "Your husband calls you 'Mel-chan,' doesn't he?"

The entire tavern erupted in laughter.

"STOP LAUGHING! My family life is none of your business!" Her tanned face turned a dark shade of red. "I waited outside forever! How long were you going to keep me waiting?!"

"Now, now, Mel-chan, don't get so heated," I teased.

"Yeah, Mel-chan, there’s no need to fight," Famille added.

"I don't wish to fight Mel-chan either," Dirac said.

"STOP CALLING ME MEL-CHAN!"

"Look, Meldinasa," I said, getting serious. "You said I kept you waiting. But while I told you to 'take it outside,' I never actually said 'I’m coming out too.'"

"YOU BRAT!" She snapped. She lashed out with her whip.

WHIP-CRACK!

The tip of the whip split into dozens of black tentacles that surged toward me like a landslide. This was clearly her leather-processing technique at work. I dodged, but the tentacles followed me like they had a mind of their own. I grabbed a chair and threw it; the tentacles ensnared it but kept coming. I jumped to the side and, instinctively, shoved Famille toward the tentacles.

"KYAAAAAA!"

The tentacles wrapped around Famille, finally stopping.

"Oh no! Famille!" I said.

"DON'T ACT LIKE IT'S SOMEONE ELSE'S PROBLEM!" Dirac and Meldinasa screamed at me simultaneously.

"Sorry... she was just nearby..."

"Move and she's dead!" Meldinasa tightened the whip. "Now, Dirac! If you want your student to live, come back to headquarters with me!"

"How cowardly!" I muttered.

"WE SAID STOP ACTING LIKE IT'S NOT YOUR FAULT!" all three of them yelled at me.

"Dirac, what will it be?"

"Wait! Give me time to think! Two or three years?"

"NO! Answer me!"

Dirac sighed and stepped forward. "I have no choice. I will show you the technique I kept from the Organization."

Knitting needles and a bundle of white yarn slid from Dirac's sleeves into his hands.

"BEHOLD!"

His hands moved at god-like speed. A roar echoed through the shop.

A giant white dragon made of yarn appeared in mid-air.

It snaked through the air and bit through the leather whips holding Famille.

"This is one of my ultimate French Knitting techniques: **The Flash-Flicker Rising Dragon!**"

"HOW IS THAT KNITTING?!" I screamed. "That's not how anything works!"

"You misunderstand, Lina-san! 'French Knitting' is a general term for anything made with this yarn! Therefore, as long as it's made of the yarn, it's French Knitting, no matter how it was made or what it looks like!"

"How did a yarn dragon bite through leather?!"

"It didn't bite! It sawed through it using the yarn hidden in its mouth!"

"I see!" Meldinasa cried. "I must have that technique! I'm taking you in! Die—!"

"I don't think so! **Dragon Fire Attack!**"

Before Meldinasa could move, the yarn dragon coiled around her.

"Hmph! A simple constriction move?" she mocked.

"Look at the dragon's head," Dirac smirred.

She looked up. The dragon’s head was hovering over an oil lamp on the wall.

Yarn, as we all know, is very flammable.

"Wait, wait, wait!"

The dragon plunged its head into the lamp. *WHOOSH!*

Meldinasa was engulfed in a spectacular, albeit controlled, fireball. When the flames died down, a crispy Meldinasa fell to the floor.

"That was a brilliant plan, Dirac," I said later, after we had tied up the unconscious Meldinasa. "Using Famille's terrible knitting skills to bait his professional pride and create an opening. Only a pro would think of that."

"Was I really that bad...?" Famille sobbed.

We decided the only way to end this for good was to go to the headquarters.

We traveled north for five days to a town called Crownwall. The headquarters was a dilapidated mansion in the slums.

"The HQ is actually underground," Dirac explained. "It takes up an entire city block."

We infiltrated the mansion. Despite looking like a ruin, the doors moved silently—someone was maintaining this place. We found a secret passage behind a wall triggered by a knitting needle.

Inside the white hallway, we were stopped by **Gaisem**, another of the Three Generals. He used silk threads—silkworm silk—to create massive webs that blocked our path.

"You're trapped!" Gaisem's voice echoed.

"Gaisem! You're the silk specialist!" Dirac shouted.

"Lina-san, what do we do? My dragon can't reach him through the webs!"

I sighed and turned around. "Let's just ignore him and keep going."

"What?!" Gaisem screamed from behind the web. "You're ignoring me?! I'm one of the Three Generals!"

"You're just a glorified security guard because you have no real work to do," I mocked. "You're probably about to get fired."

"SHUT UP! I'LL GET YOU!"

He tried to chase us with the silk, but the webs moved at the speed of a slow-walking child. We just walked faster and left his lonely voice behind in the dark.

Finally, we reached the leader's room. Suddenly, the carpet on the floor surged up and wrapped around Dirac!

"Master!"

The leader was **Gracyde von Crabmeier**, a handsome, arrogant man in a white suit. He was a master of carpet-weaving.

"If you want to save your students, Dirac, return to us."

"**Fire Whip!**" I lashed out, but his carpet was woven with metal fibers—my fire didn't even singe it.

"It's useless," Gracyde laughed. "One more spell and I'll kill them both."

"Famille!" Dirac yelled. "You're our only hope! Show him your true power!"

"Me?!" Famille pulled out her knitting needles. She worked feverishly and held up her creation.

"A doily."

WHAM! I kicked her in the face. "How is a doily going to help us?!"

"Ignore her! Again, Famille!" Dirac urged.

She started knitting again. Gracyde watched, his face twisting in agony.

"No! Stop! You're miscounting the stitches! Your tension is all wrong! Here, let me show you—"

Gracyde walked right up to her, completely defenseless, to fix her knitting.

BAM!

I knocked him unconscious with a single punch.

"Another perfect plan," I said later. "Using Famille's lack of skill to trigger his professional instincts."

"I'm sorry you lost your master," Gracyde sighed (now tied up). "But I cannot let such terrible technique go unguided. Take him, Dirac. Teach her properly."

"Master, I feel like everyone is being very mean to me..." Famille whimpered.

Now, it was my turn. I approached Gracyde. "Alright, tell me where the treasure is."

"What?! Why?!"

"To prevent the 'Evil Organization' from rebuilding, I'm confiscating your funds!"

"Um... Lina-san?" Dirac whispered. "We aren't actually an illegal organization. We just

do fashion research. If you take the money... you'd just be a bank robber."

...Wait.

Dirac was a deserter... Meldinasa was a housewife... they weren't actually criminals? I was the one who broke in here?

Does that mean... my plan to get rich is...?

"Well, all's well that ends well," Dirac said happily. "Here are the two gold coins I promised you, Lina-san."

Two. Gold. Coins.

"Thank you, Lina-san!" Famille waved.

I stood there in the middle of the mansion, frozen in shock, as the three of them reconciled happily.

(Freedom in His Hands: END)

Afterword

Author (Kanzaka): Sorry to keep you all waiting forever! Here is Slayers Special Volume 12, *The Maid Might Have Seen It!* ...Though, I wonder if this title is actually okay!?

L: ...Wait? Wasn't the book coming out this time supposed to be a main series novel (Long Novel)?

Kanzaka: .....

L: Oh. He went silent.

Kanzaka: ...A-Anyway, moving on... First, an announcement! For next year's 1998 New Year's card, in response to many requests saying "I don't care if it's black and white, I just want to see it," we're planning to send out **"L in Lord of Nightmares Version, featuring Beast Master and Sea King."** However, for those who only sent letters for the popularity poll, you'll be moved to the following year's mailing list due to processing constraints. Please understand.

L: Just so you know, even if you hurry and send a letter after reading this afterword, you'll probably still be pushed to the year after next.

Kanzaka: Yup! By the time the first edition of this book hits store shelves, the address list will be finished and the front of the postcards will already be in printing! Or rather, if they aren't, we won't make the deadline! So, there's that. The author is actually writing this afterword in October, but...

L: Well then, due to space limitations, let's get right to it...

S: "Thunder in the Heavens, Howl upon the Earth! Masters of Destruction and Creation! The 3rd Slayers Popularity Poll"—Mid-point Results Announcement!

L: Ooh. I wonder how it's looking. I'm excited!

Kanzaka: Up until now, Xellos overtook Lina (who was top in the first tally) to take 1st place! That's how things have been developing... but looking at the postcards, it seems the pattern most people are hoping for is: "L suddenly crashes and burns at the very end."

L: DON'T HOPE FOR THAT! In the end, I'll make a comeback and take the top spot! If all the dogs, cats, and Javan sparrows across the country vote for me, it's possible!

Kanzaka: ...Wow... she started accepting votes from cats and dogs just to get to the top... she's thrown away her pride...

L: Anyway! Let's see the results! Go ahead, Subordinate S! Do it quickly!

Naga (S): Yes, Ma'am! Starting right with the top! Unchanged from before, **Beast Priest Xellos**! And in 2nd place is **Lina Inverse**!

L: Hmph. Still the same, huh?

Kanzaka: The protagonist is in trouble! With only a few months of tallying left, will she be able to overtake Xellos, or will she have to settle for 2nd place for the first time!?

S: Incidentally, the gap between Xellos and Lina has grown slightly wider since the last tally. That said, Xellos's votes started surging right when the TV anime *Slayers TRY* began broadcasting. It's possible that once the show ends, his momentum will stop and Lina will pull ahead... but who knows what will happen?

And in 3rd place—congrats on your TV eye-catch appearance!—is our very own **Lady L (Lina)**. By the way, the gap between 3rd and 2nd is massive, so a rank-up is basically impossible for you.

L: ...*Sob sob sob sob*...

Kanzaka: This Naga... now that she thinks she's safe until the announcement is over, she's really speaking her mind...

S: And 4th place! **Gourry** has overtaken Zelgadis by a narrow margin!

Kanzaka: Ohhh!

S: But the difference is truly tiny! It's impossible to predict how it will move! 5th place is **Zelgadis**, and 6th is **Amelia**! And... oh-ho!?

Lina: What is it?

S: It's **Valgaav**! The *Slayers TRY* original character, Valgaav, has leaped from 17th place all the way to 7th!

Kanzaka & L: OOOOOOOOOOHH!

L: Wow. He's pretty popular. (In a reporter's tone) Mr. Kanzaka, what do you think is the cause of Valgaav's popularity surge?

Kanzaka: His slender waist and exposed navel.

L: ...Seriously... what a tasteless explanation...

Kanzaka: I don't think I'm far off, though...

L: Well, true...

S: Being pushed aside by Valgaav, 8th place is **Big Sis from back home** (Luna Inverse)! 9th place is **me, Staff S**, who is raking in the sympathy votes, followed by **Naga the White Serpent** in 10th!

L: I see. So for the Top 10, Gourry and Zelgadis swapped, and Valgaav jumped to 7th. Everything else is the same.

S: Yes. Following them are Sherra (who got pushed down), Filia (who ranked up), and **Gaav**, who caused a mass of "brain-dead" fans during the final episode of *TRY*.

Kanzaka: Ah. *That* scene.

L: ...Th-that was... pretty harsh... Why did it end up like that...?

Kanzaka: Well... actually, a popularity poll postcard from Mr. Ando in Chiba suggested something like that... When I met the TV staff at a recording session, I said, "Hey, there was a suggestion for Gaav in a sailor schoolgirl uniform," and they said, "**THAT'S IT! Decided for the final episode eye-catch!**" ...And that's how it happened. Forgive me.

L: ...Ugh...

S: ...W-well... putting that aside... Pulling ourselves together, from 14th down we have: Phibrizzo, Sylphiel, Lemmy, Salina from the *Slayers RETURN* movie, Beast Master Zelas-Metallium, Luke, and the Author. That rounds out the Top 20.

L: There's a lot of movement in that range!

S: Yes. It's a real "dango" (clumped) state there; some are separated by only a few votes. There's a high chance it'll change by the final tally.

L: I see. Well then! The final results will be in the next paperback! That's fine and all, but are you actually going to get the book out on time, Hajime Kanzaka!?

S: What will happen to the rankings for Lina, Xellos, and Lady L!?

Kanzaka: Who will be laughing, and who will be crying!?

Kanzaka + L + S: Look forward to the next one!

Afterword: THE END